

**SPECIAL
NFL
PREVIEW**

PREDICTIONS & TEAM BY TEAM ANALYSIS

SPORT

**OLYMPICS
PREVIEW**



EMMITT SMITH

1996 NFL

FOOTBALL PREVIEW



DAN MARINO



JUNIOR SEAU

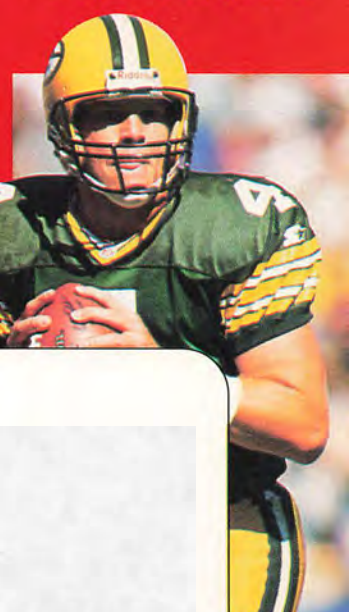
SPORT PREDICTIONS

NFC EAST	DALLAS
NFC CENTRAL	GREEN BAY
NFC WEST	SAN FRANCISCO
AFC EAST	BUFFALO
AFC CENTRAL	PITTSBURGH
AFC WEST	SAN DIEGO

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DALLAS

AUGUST 1996



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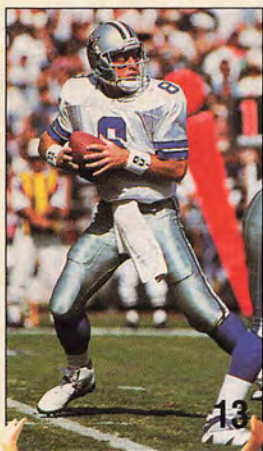
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COVER: EMMITT SMITH BY MICHAEL C. HEBERT/SPURLOCK PHOTOGRAPHY; DAN MARINO BY TOM DIPACE; JUNIOR SEAU BY JON SOOHOO; BRETT FAVRE BY STEVE WOLTMANN.

SPORT

AUGUST 1996



GOLD MEDAL U.

Stanford University has done more than just carve a niche in the summer Olympics; what the California school has done for two weeks every four years can better be described as excavation.

Of the United States' 37 gold medals at the 1992 Games in Barcelona, 10 were garnered by either current or former Cardinal, all in swimming events. The winners: Pablo Morales, Sum-

mer Sanders and Jenny Thompson each with two; and Janet Evans, Joe Hudepohl, Lea Loveless and Jeff Rouse with one.

Stanford athletes again will step up to the highest spot on the platform this summer, to be sure. The last time the Cardinal failed to bring home gold in U.S.-attended Olympic games was 1912.



Swimmers aren't the only Olympians coming from Palo Alto. USA volleyball, tennis, water polo, baseball, track and diving have had their share from Stanford, and this year, there promises to be even more. The school will try to better its mark from the Barcelona Games, where, if it were a country, it would have placed 13th in the world with its 19 total medals.

—Paul M. Johnson



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—Richard Watt

STUDENTS OF THE GAME

The old college try no longer would get the job done.

That seems to be the growing sentiment on the chances a U.S. Olympic basketball team composed solely of amateurs—the way it worked pre-1992 and the original Dream Team—would have of taking home the gold in Atlanta.

"They'd get killed," NBA director of scouting Marty Blake goes so far as saying.

Granted, the rest of the world has narrowed the talent gap, but a team led by paint prowlers Marcus Camby and Tim Duncan and the perimeter prowess of Allen Iverson and Ray Allen "killed"?

"They couldn't compete," insists Blake, who files reports for the NBA on the top collegiate talent. "You take the Croatian team with Toni Kukoc and those guys. It'd be a joke." Blake is quick to point out that a college all-star team that competed in Greece last summer finished a dismal seventh.

Original Dream Teamer Charles Barkley, who has elbowed his way onto Team Trey as well, agrees that the U.S. now wields the serious artillery out of necessity—that our collegians are overmatched against other countries' pros, some of whom play in the NBA.

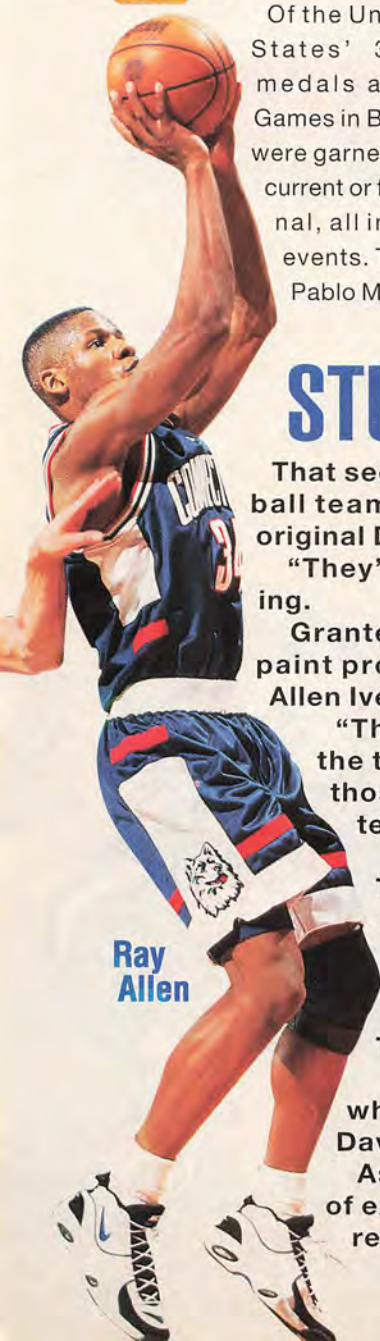
"They're not good enough to compete against these strong men," Barkley says. "What would Kukoc and [Dino] Radja do to those guys? They're so much better. Kukoc is a terrific player."

Yet not in the class of the Dream Teamers (OK, maybe Glenn Robinson), who among other selling points, flaunt a pretty fair third-string center in David Robinson. Gold medal? That would be a yes.

As for Duncan, Camby and Co., their dreams are on hold because of a lack of experience. Nothing a few years in the NBA can't cure, though by then the rest of the world will have completely caught up, right?

That would be a no.

—Steve Gordon



Ray Allen



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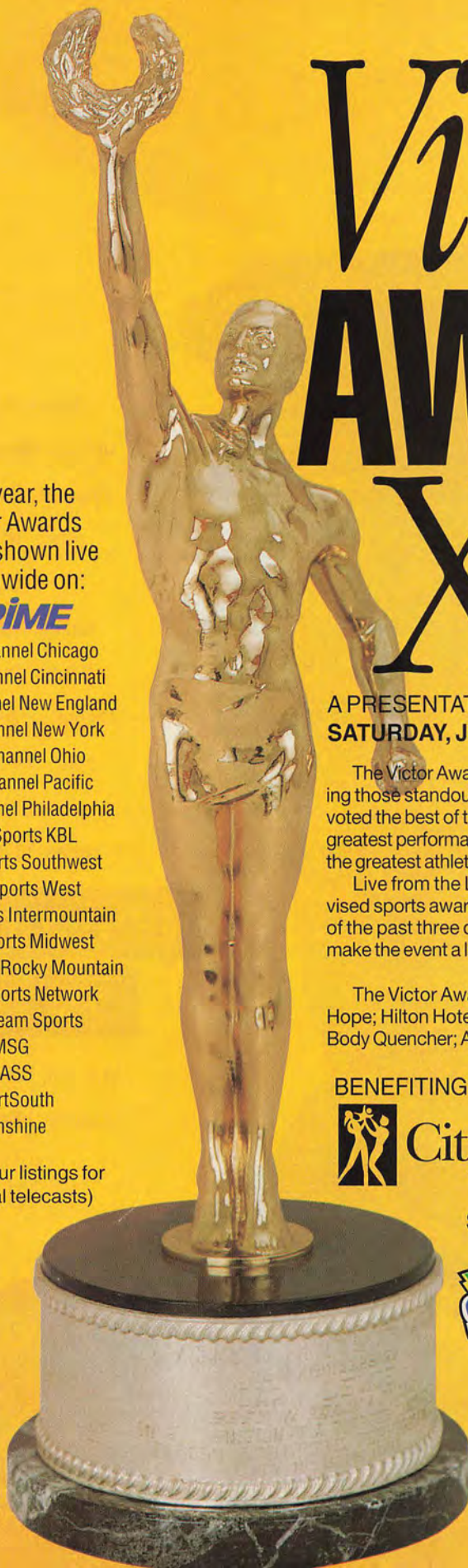
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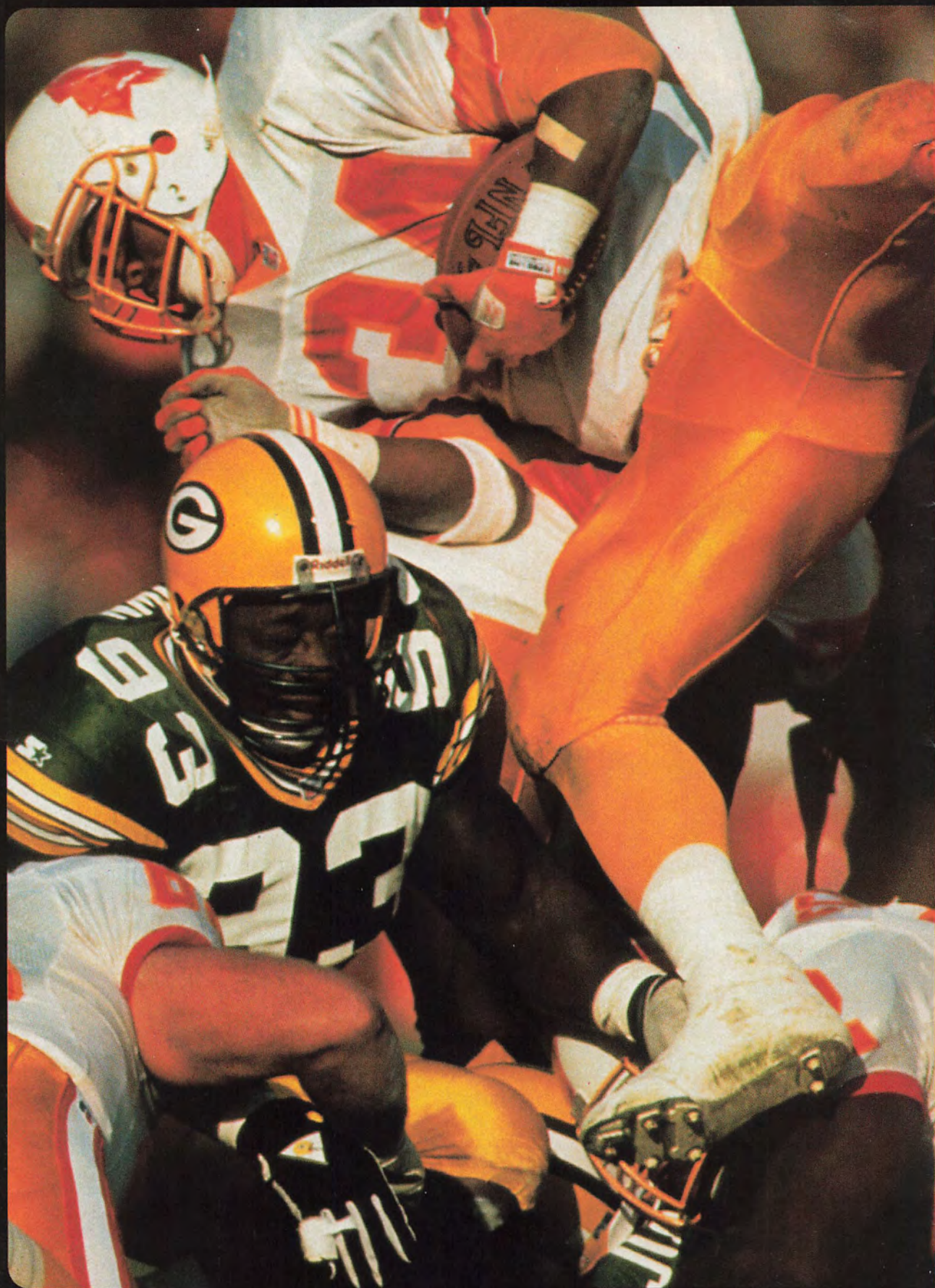
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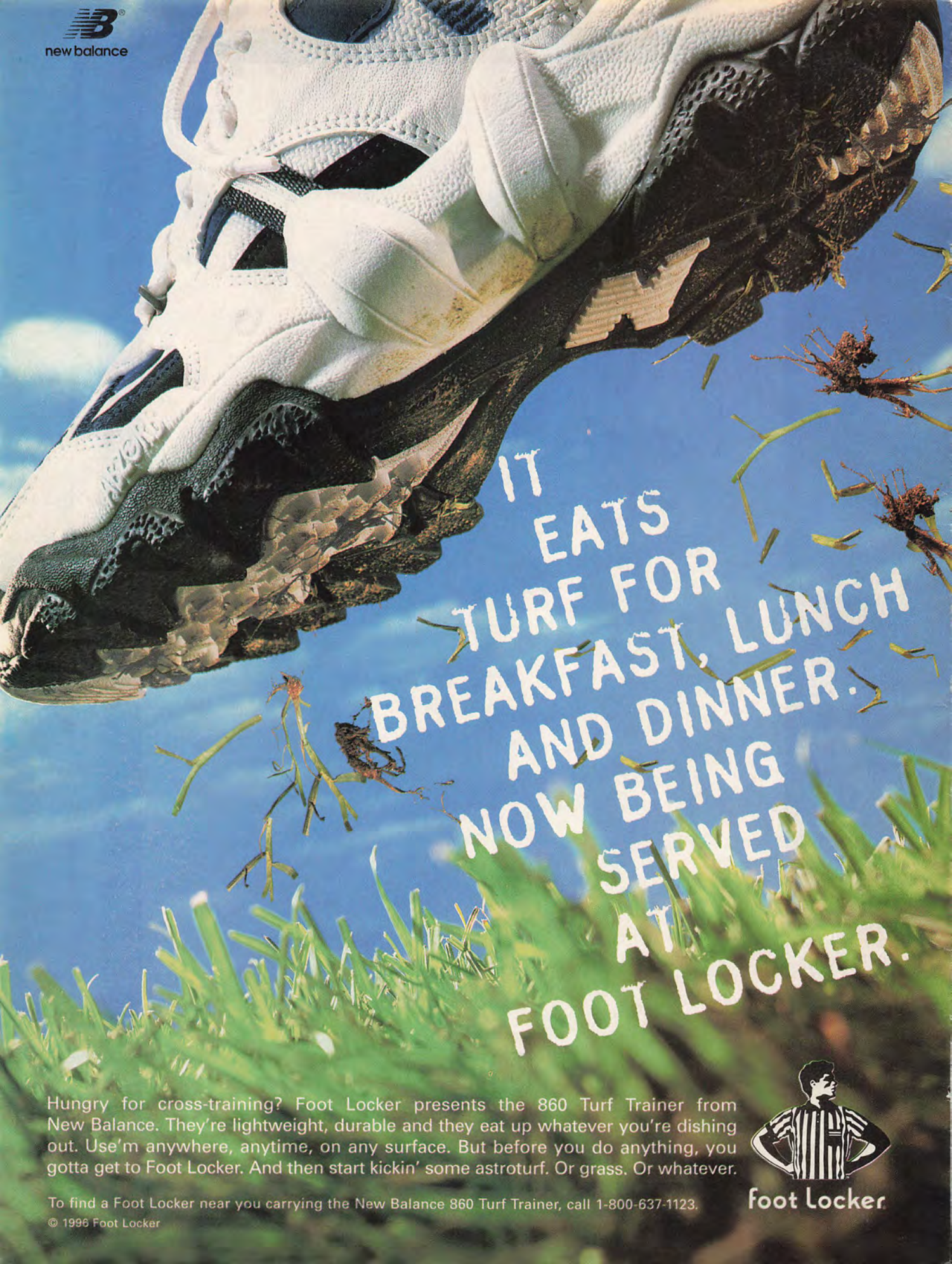
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WINNERS? WELL, HISTORY WILL FOREVER DOCUMENT A 27-17 VICTORY OVER THE PITTSBURGH STEELERS on Jan. 28, 1996, in Tempe, Ariz. But the Cowboys were survivors, which was perhaps their greatest accomplishment of the 1995 season, greater than having made NFL history by becoming the first team to win three Super Bowls in four seasons.

They survived not only a midseason loss to San Francisco, but oodles of lost confidence in the process. They survived the Fourth-and-One Debacle in Philadelphia followed by a final-minute, 20-18 deficit against the Giants when only a diving third-down catch by Kevin Williams and the 22nd consecutive field goal by Chris Boniol—his fifth of the day—slammed the door on disaster.

MICKY PELEGER

THOUGH DEFENDING CHAMPS, THE
COWBOYS NOW FIND THEMSELVES
ON THE DEFENSIVE IN INSATIABLE

BIG D/By Mickey Spagnola

Camp Controversy





Despite a rough off-season, Big D can take heart: Aikman (pictured) and Emmitt return, reason enough for continued success.

With Lombardi Trophy finally in hand, the Cowboys' coaching staff collectively took a knee in their Sun Devils locker room. Boat people wouldn't have looked so haggard, so relieved to merely reach the promised land. Rejoicing might have come later, but for that moment, "guys were just laying around in there," Dallas running backs coach Joe Brodsky says of his coaching brethren. "It was ugly."

The players too. Sure, some postured. Some crowded. Boys will be Boys. But maybe more than anything, these Cowboys were just so darn glad not to be explaining why they had failed to win *another* Super Bowl. Winning took a backseat to survival. That's the way it is with boat people.

And before the sun would rise in this Valley of the Sun, the quarterback, Troy Aikman, already was predicting that even though the Cowboys won Super Bowl XXX, even though they had now dominated Super Bowls during their 36 years of existence like no other, and even though they demonstrated they could win a Super Bowl with-

out Jimmy Johnson, soon in Dallas this last Lombardi would give way to 1996.

"We have about two weeks to enjoy this," Aikman said in the wee hours as only the hard core remained in his private suite at The Buttes Resort.

His partner in offensive movement, Michael Irvin, says the pressure to repeat in 1996 began to build the minute he walked out of the Sun Devil Stadium locker room. "Someone yelled, 'Way to go Mike,'" Irvin recalls, "'now win one again next year.' How can we take things for granted?"

Next year is here. The Cowboys report to training camp July 18 at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas. Arriving fat and sassy, satisfied and complacent, would be dangerous living for a Cowboy in Dallas, where enough is never enough. And for sure, Aikman, having lived in this city of reflections going on eight years, knows there's no less pressure to win in '96 than there was in '95 when second-year coach Barry Switzer shrugged off only part of that monkey Johnson left behind.

"Not in this town," Aikman says. "Other places, after winning a Super Bowl, maybe....Dallas isn't a sports town, it's a winners town. People back winners."

As far as the city of Dallas is concerned, the Cowboys are 0-0 today, four years of yesterdays no consolation.

OWNER JERRY JONES STRODE off the club's Valley Ranch practice field, the late April sun shadowing his navy blue golf shirt. He'd just witnessed another minicamp workout, showcasing his newest draft choices and free agents.

And he, more than most in this organization, knew that whatever post-Super Bowl honeymoon enjoyed out here at The Ranch was history.

"At a time when you should be savoring the moment, having won three of the last four Super Bowls, and at a time where there is so

much criticism and dwelling on the negatives, this gives you the resolve and motivation to continue working as hard as ever," Jones says.

He shrugged, as if this was business as usual with the high-profile Cowboys, saying, "Quite frankly, there was no honeymoon from the start when we got here. This could be healthy."

Healthy in a perverse sense. This off-season for the Cowboys is perceived as one like no other. In reality, it has been business as usual around this franchise, which quite frankly, knows not how to escape the public eye—not locally, not nationally.

Another player was arrested, Irvin taken in on a felony drug possession charge in Dallas. Irvin's arrest in a hotel room while in the company of two self-proclaimed "self-employed models," also did little for his and the Cowboys' image, triggering stories nationwide of Dallas debauchery and impending demise.

More players were lost through free agency, this time four defensive starters: tackle Russell Maryland and cornerback Larry Brown to Oakland, and linebackers Dixon Edwards and Robert Jones to Minnesota and St. Louis, respectively. And this does not even include No. 1 backup offensive lineman Ron Stone, who signed for more money per season with the Giants as a restricted free agent than four of the Cowboys' five starting offensive linemen are due to make. Go figure.

Assistant coaches departed. Linebackers coach Jim Eddy was named defensive coordinator with Detroit. Defensive-line coach John Blake, some say by the grace of God, became the head coach at the University of Oklahoma. Blake had accused Aikman of yelling only at black players on the offense and creating a deep divide between the Pro Bowl quarterback and the head coach, between Blake and the majority of this coaching staff.

"I'm very aware of all of this, and it reminds me of '89 and '90 when we were being criticized a lot," Jerry Jones says.

This would be enough off-season adversity for most teams, but not Dallas, where excess is the rule rather than the exception. There was

"Dallas isn't a sports town, it's a winners town. People back winners." —Troy Aikman

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As far as Dallas is concerned, the Cowboys are 0-0 today, four years of yesterdays no consolation.

a report of players pooling money to rent what amounted to a party house where rendezvous with girlfriends could be arranged. There were newspaper reports that several players failed an NFL-sanctioned drug test, a charge vehemently denied by

given the Cowboys the right of first refusal when the deal runs out in 1997.

"It's a challenge," Jones says of working out a deal before 1997. "But to use the word 'problem' implies there are hurdles we can't

which surely must sound somewhat incredulous to the uninitiated.

But look closely into the Cowboys, instead of into perception, especially when it comes to free-agency losses and team personnel. Sure, the Cowboys lost four defen-

TOM D'PACE

TOM D'PACE



Deion (21) will see more end-zone action on offense, perhaps out of pure need: Irvin, in trouble with the law, could miss time.

the league and the club, both insisting that those prematurely administered urinalysis tests were never checked by the NFL.

Then renegotiation of running back Emmitt Smith's contract began, and since the past two deals had been negotiated less than amicably, an immediate black cloud seemed to form. And that despite Smith changing agents, hiring Deion Sanders' guy, Eugene Parker, and despite Smith having one year left on his contract and having

overcome. We have the ability to put a contract in place."

Contracts maybe, but what about ligaments and tendons? Starting cornerback Kevin Smith, though showing great progress, still was rehabilitating his torn Achilles tendon. Starting defensive ends Tony Tolbert and Charles Haley still were rebounding from surgeries, Tolbert having an elbow and both knees scoped and Haley an extruding back disk repaired. And Pro Bowl center Ray Donaldson, all of 38, is racing the season opener to fully rehab his surgically repaired fractured and dislocated right ankle.

Well, then, how 'bout dem Cowboys?

"I don't think you see us coming apart at the seams," Jones argues,

sive starters, but there are replacements for each. Chad Hennings steps in for Maryland at defensive tackle, and the Cowboys should have Leon Lett for 16 games instead of last year's 12 due to violation of the NFL's substance-abuse edicts.

Yeah, the Cowboys lost Brown, the Super Bowl's MVP. But they gain Deion Sanders, who decided to forgo baseball in 1996 to become a full-time, two-way football player. And if Kevin Smith is ready from the get-go, a corner combo of Sanders and Smith certainly is better than what the Cowboys played with in the opening seven games last year—Brown and Clayton Holmes. Even Sanders and second-year corner Alundis Brice figures to be a better combo than

Brown-Holmes.

Also, the Cowboys are buying into Sanders' two-way dream, the accomplished corner working almost exclusively at wide receiver during the off-season. His potential as the third receiver (or a share of the second spot with Kevin Williams) would be an improvement over last year's third receiver, Cory Fleming, cut during the off-season.

But if Irvin should miss time, either from a jail sentence or an NFL suspension, the Cowboys would be stretched thin at receiver.

"There have been highs and lows, and maybe for us this was typical," Cowboys scouting director Larry Lacewell says of the off-season. "The lows, any time you lose a Russell Maryland, you've lost something special. Not his ability, but him as a person. The highs, picking off a couple free agents."

One of those free agents is Broderick Thomas, who must replace Edwards, maybe the bedrock soul of this defense, on the strong side. Thomas is with his fourth team in four seasons and has a trail of off-field troubles. But he's playing for minimum wage and likely his continued NFL life. Fighting for playing

time will be second-round draft choice Randall Godfrey, a rugged-looking backer from Georgia.

Fred Strickland is the other prized free agent, set to replace an overrated Robert Jones in the middle. Jones was rather average against the run and below average in pass coverage.

And if a team beset with so many off-season downers can be lucky, the Cowboys were just that to acquire safety Roger Harper, a three-year starter in Atlanta who cost them only a fourth- and fifth-round draft choice. Reason suggests Harper must be better than last year's backup and nickel safety Scott Case, who was in his 12th season.

Reason also suggests that offensive tackle Erik Williams, with a second off-season to rehab his reconstructed right knee, will be stronger, and that Larry Allen, with his first full NFL year at guard behind him, should also be improved. Same for Kevin Williams, mostly an ignored receiver until the Cowboys' offense became desperate late in the season. Same for the return game if the Cowboys decide to utilize Sanders.

And frankly, the addition of Jim Bates as linebacker coach, and the new combo of Craig Boller and former 49ers aid Tommy Hart on the defensive line, also are pluses when it comes to coaching and teaching.

All this on a team good enough to win the last Super Bowl. "No matter what has happened," Lacewell says, "teams still better worry about number 8 [Aikman] and an offense that didn't lose a player. And they still better worry about a defensive team that continues to lose players yet still plays well."

His point: The Cowboys, because of free agency and the salary cap, no longer can put a Cadillac at every position. But at least they still do at the high-impact positions of quarterback, running back, wide receiver, tight end, defensive end, cornerback and safety.

"Teams are closing the gap," Aikman says. "They closed the gap last year, and I don't know if we were the best team in the league then. But we did come together at the right time and won. So I still think we're talented enough, and we can make as good a run at the title as anybody."

Case closed. ★



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(RICHARD CHANDLER, ASTRONOMER)

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NFC EAST

Dallas Cowboys (12-4)
Philadelphia Eagles (10-6)
Washington Redskins (9-7)
Arizona Cardinals (6-10)
New York Giants (4-12)

NFC CENTRAL

Green Bay Packers (11-5)
Detroit Lions (9-7)
Chicago Bears (9-7)
Tampa Bay Buccaneers (6-10)
Minnesota Vikings (5-11)

NFC WEST

San Francisco 49ers (10-6)
Atlanta Falcons (9-7)
Carolina Panthers (7-9)
St. Louis Rams (7-9)
New Orleans Saints (6-10)

AFC EAST

Buffalo Bills (10-6)
New England Patriots (9-7)
Miami Dolphins (9-7)
Indianapolis Colts (7-9)
New York Jets (7-9)

AFC CENTRAL

Pittsburgh Steelers (10-6)
Cincinnati Bengals (9-7)
Jacksonville Jaguars (7-9)
Houston Oilers (6-10)
Baltimore Ravens (5-11)

AFC WEST

San Diego Chargers (11-5)
Kansas City Chiefs (9-7)
Denver Broncos (8-8)
Oakland Raiders (7-9)
Seattle Seahawks (6-10)

NFC CHAMPS

Dallas Cowboys

AFC CHAMPS

San Diego Chargers

SUPER BOWL CHAMPS

Cowboys

MOST VALUABLE PLAYER

Jeff Blake, Cincinnati Bengals

COACH OF THE YEAR

Mike Holmgren, Green Bay Packers

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NFC EAST DALLAS COWBOYS

1



Emmitt Smith's 25 rushing TDs make him Dallas' MVP, and he wants to be paid as such.

1996 OVERVIEW Free agency, the salary cap, injury and poor recent drafts have robbed Dallas, the best team of the decade, of its depth, particularly on defense. Plus, two key starters, center Ray Donaldson and cornerback Kevin Smith, probably will miss the preseason. Then there's a drug-controversy cloud over superstar Michael Irvin, whom the Cowboys can't afford to lose. The players motivated themselves last season, wanting to prove they could win without Jimmy Johnson. They are still better than San Francisco, and the Packers can't beat them on AstroTurf. Dallas wins a fifth consecutive NFC East title, something no team has ever done.

QUARTERBACK Troy Aikman turns 30 and still wishes Barry Switzer was a stricter disciplinarian. Everyone knows that Aikman is the man, the money leader of the team. With the spotlight on, he is clutch. He owns the NFL's all-time best postseason completion percentage (68.3) and yards-per-attempt (8.65) mark, while only Bart Starr has a better quarterback rating. Aikman remains tough, overcoming concussions and knee injuries to make every start last season. Tossing out his miserable 0-11 rookie season, Aikman has won 70 of his last 98 starts, including playoffs. Wade Wilson and Jason Garrett give the Cowboys great depth. **Grade: A+**

RUNNING BACKS Emmitt Smith figures to be a contract headache this summer, and owner Jerry Jones will be hard-pressed, cap-wise, to give him Deion money. Smith, though, was the reason Dallas led the NFL in scoring efficiency. The Cowboys produced points on 43.8 percent of their 169 possessions. Smith scored 25 touchdowns last season, and with 96 he's only 14 away from tying all-time leader Walter Payton. Smith also has his eyes on a fifth NFL rushing title. Darryl Johnston enters his last contract season as the best blocking fullback in the league, although the 30 receptions were his fewest in four seasons. **Grade: A+**

RECEIVERS Irvin is the final part of Dallas' offensive triplets, and his 1995 season was a spectacular high (drug pun intended).

Irvin, the game's most physical receiver, set personal marks in receptions (111), yards (1,603) and touchdowns (10). He was so consistent that he had 11 100-yard receiving games, a new NFL record. Irvin pushes off a lot, but few position themselves out of the break as well as he does. Kevin Williams proved clutch in the '95 turnaround game against the Giants, and Aikman now has confidence in him. The big unknown is how much offense Deion Sanders can play; he quit baseball to work on his receiving skills. Tight end Jay Novacek is slowing down, but his presence is critical to the offense and Aikman's well-being. Eric Bjornson is the next Novacek. **Grade: A**

OFFENSIVE LINE This is the baddest group in the NFL, and Hudson Houck is the perfect coach for these guys. Since the Super Bowl, Houck has lost his top two reserves, Ron Stone and Derek Kennard, and Donaldson is attempting to make a comeback at age 38. Those are the lone worries because right tackle Erik Williams and right guard Larry Allen may be the two best linemen at their positions in the league. Both are powerful drive blockers. Mark Tuinei is a perfectionist and solid left tackle, a huge reason why Dallas allowed only 18 sacks, the NFL's second-lowest total. Nate Newton is nearing the end, but he was overpowering in the playoffs. Shane Hannah must bounce back from a rookie season on injured-reserve, while Michael Baptiste and George Hegamin spent the spring in the World League trying to gain some experience. **Grade: A**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS The linebacker corps was decimated with the free-agent losses of Robert Jones and Dixon Edwards and ACL surgery to Godfrey Myles, who might not be ready for the opener. Fred Strickland will replace Jones in the middle, while bad boy Broderick Thomas is insurance on the outside. Leon Lett has quickly developed into one of the best all-around tackles, but new sidekick Chad Hennings had elbow surgery in the off-season. Dallas will sorely miss Russell Maryland's leadership, while Tony Tolbert and Charles Haley must wind up those tired bones; despite injuries to both veterans, they combined for 16 sacks. **Grade: C**

SECONDARY Gone are Super Bowl MVP Larry Brown and Robert Bailey, the club's best nickel back. Brown had six interceptions to Deion's two. The Cowboys remain loaded because Kevin Smith is expected back in top form from Achilles surgery. Smith and Sanders would form the best duo of cover corners in the NFL, and Darren Woodson simply is the best strong safety in the league. Brock Marion had six picks in his first full season as the starting free safety. Ex-Falcon Roger Harper becomes the third safety, while Alundis Brice will be the nickel back. **Grade: A**

SPECIAL TEAMS Chris Boniol missed a 20-yard field goal in the third game of the season, then proceeded to finish 1995 by converting 25 consecutive field goals. The coverage and return teams ranked in the top 10, while punter John Jett is merely adequate. Kevin Williams is always a threat on kickoff returns. **Grade: B**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT Switzer joined Jimmy Johnson as the only coaches to win a college national championship and a Super Bowl. He operates a loose ship, but the Cowboys did win. Jerry Jones is a super businessman but doesn't have an eye for personnel. This area needs an upgrade. **Grade: B-**

1996 DRAFT The Boys didn't nail an impact player, but Kavika Pittman from tiny McNeese State has the same upside

that Charles Haley did. Georgia linebacker Randall Godfrey suffered a hamstring tear last season. Center Clay Shiver was a great player at Florida State and fills a need here. **Grade: C**

SPORT RATING: A
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 12-4

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PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

2

1996 OVERVIEW Based on their overall talent and suspect offensive line, the Eagles easily can be underestimated. No one will overlook them this time, though, because coach Ray Rhodes proved a year ago that he can produce victories from almost nothing. Rhodes isn't afraid to bench anybody—the Eagles had 38 different starters and 17 offensive linemen last season—and the rookie coach gained the instant respect of his peers with 10 wins, plus a crushing victory over the Lions in the playoffs. Rhodes should win 10 again.

QUARTERBACK Most pro scouts will tell you Rodney Peete is nothing more than a journeyman backup, that he can't take any team to the Super Bowl, that he's prone to making the blunder and incapable of being a high-percentage thrower. Now, all that is true, but Peete is a winner. He directed the NFL's 29th-ranked pass offense and didn't have a completion beyond 37 yards, but he was 6-0 at the Vet and 9-3 overall as the starter. Peete also said good riddance to Randall Cunningham. However, he faces a new menace in ex-Packer Ty Detmer. Detmer worked with coordinator Jon Gruden in Green Bay, and he may understand the nuances of this offense better than Peete. Look for a controversy if the Eagles don't win early. **Grade: C-**

RUNNING BACKS Gruden referred to Ricky Watters as the Eagles' version of Michael Jordan. In production, that was true (his 1,707 yards accounting for 36 percent of the offense), but Watters doesn't have Jordan's flash, nor is he much of a team player. Charlie Garner, who averaged 5.4 yards on 108 carries, has truly dazzling speed and moves. He needs more playing time. Fullback Kevin Turner returns after tearing up his knee in Week 2; he's a big-time blocker and receiver. There aren't enough footballs for this trio. **Grade: B+**

RECEIVERS Fred Barnett refused to adjust to Gruden's offense, and he had no faith in Peete's arm, so he's been replaced by Irving Fryar, who's more of a team guy and capable of 60-70 receptions. Fryar has averaged 50 catches over the last six seasons. Calvin Williams, the ideal No. 2 receiver, has sure hands and caught 63 balls last season. Rhodes loves second-year player Chris T. Jones, and ex-Charger Mark Seay has big-play capability. Rookie tight end Jason Dunn has the pass-catching skills this West Coast offense demands. There also remained a chance that Johnny Mitchell could still end up here. Last year, the tight ends managed 31 receptions overall. **Grade: C**

OFFENSIVE LINE A lot depends on the return of left tackle Bernard Williams, who started every game as a rookie in '94 only to be suspended twice for drugs and miss the entire '95 season. Rhodes wants him back. If that doesn't happen, ex-49er Steve Wallace, a \$1 million insurance policy, will start.

Say what you will about quarterback Rodney Peete, he's a proven winner, going 9-3 as the Eagles' starter in '95.



Wallace, though, has slipped dramatically the past two seasons. The Eagles' best lineman, Lester Holmes, moves to right guard, where he can dominate. Guy McIntyre, 35, should return at left guard, while center Raleigh McKenzie battled injuries all of last season yet still started 16 games. Richard Cooper, signed away from New Orleans, is a fine run-blocking right tackle. Joe Panos and Barrett Brooks are significant backups who can start. **Grade: C**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS This group faces another overhaul after losing

most of the dominant players from the Buddy Ryan-Bud Carson years. The linebackers will be light and inexperienced, with James Willis and Marc Woodard becoming starters and Byron Evans a forgotten player. The pass rush, though, should be excellent with the return of William Fuller and overachieving Andy Harmon, who together had 24 of the team's 48 sacks last season. Mike Mamula needs to be more physical and maybe put on some weight, while the jury remains out on whether Rhett Hall has the muscle to be half as good as Harmon. Kevin Johnson and Ronnie Dixon are the best of an average reserve group. **Grade: C**

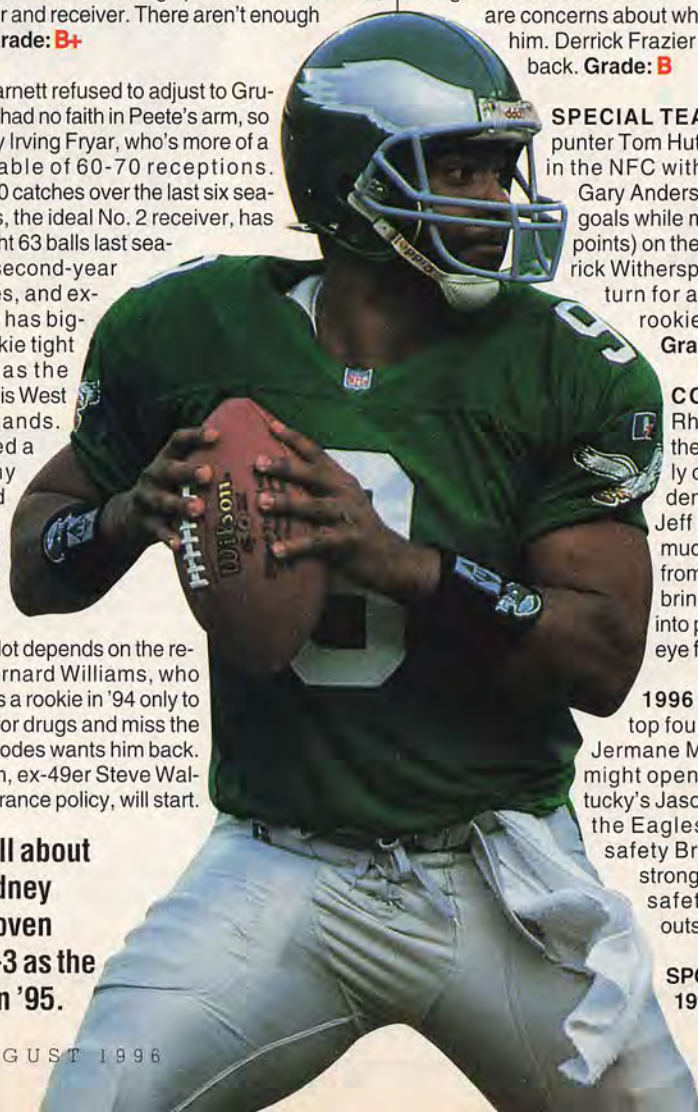
SECONDARY William Thomas was the top interceptor with seven last year, the only linebacker among the NFL leaders. That should change with the arrival of Troy Vincent from Miami and the emergence of Bobby Taylor at cornerback. These two will pound on opposing receivers. Vincent ranks among the NFL's top five cornerbacks. Michael Zordich did everything new coordinator Emmitt Thomas asked of him, something that couldn't be said for free safety Greg Jackson. There are concerns about whether Eric Zomalt could replace him. Derrick Frazier figures to improve as the nickel back. **Grade: B**

SPECIAL TEAMS The gamble with rookie punter Tom Hutton paid off as he finished third in the NFC with a 43.3 average. Ex-Steeler Gary Anderson hit three game-winning field goals while moving into the sixth spot (1,440 points) on the NFL's all-time scoring list. Derrick Witherspoon had an 86-yard kickoff return for a touchdown last season as a rookie and could draw double duty. **Grade: C**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT Rhodes deserved to be Coach of the Year, while his staff, particularly coordinators Thomas and Gruden, 32, were sensational. Owner Jeff Lurie wants to be involved too much, but Dick Daniels, hired away from Bobby Beathard in San Diego, brings some savvy personnel skills into play. Rhodes possesses a super eye for personnel. **Grade: A**

1996 DRAFT Rhodes believes his top four picks could become starters: Jermaine Mayberry, a 330-pound tackle, might open at right guard; Eastern Kentucky's Jason Dunn is a huge upgrade over the Eagles' other tight ends; Clemson safety Brian Dawkins will push for the strong-safety job; Ray Farmer played safety at Duke but projects as an outside linebacker. **Grade: B**

SPORT RATING: B
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 10-6





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1996 OVERVIEW The Redskins remain hard to figure, yet they are overdue for some consistency. They swept the Cowboys last season, holding Emmitt Smith under 100 yards, only to lose twice to the lowly Giants. The reason for optimism is their 3-1 record in December and the belief that coach Norv Turner will discover how to win with Heath Shuler, though the RFK faithful demand Gus Frerotte. Turner has decided to buy himself a defense while tinkering with the offense.

QUARTERBACK Shuler needs a confidence booster and must raise his completion percentage to 60 percent (he's currently mired at 48 percent) to make it in the NFL. Turner loves Shuler for his athleticism and brashness while understanding that the kid simply has misread every deep secondary he's faced without displaying any long-ball touch. Shuler has better comprehend that he's running out of chances because Frerotte has shown more poise while tossing 18 touchdown passes in two seasons. This is an escalating situation that screams for a settlement. **Grade: D**

RUNNING BACKS Terry Allen, the bargain-basement free-agent of '95, helped give the Redskins the seventh-best rushing offense by slashing between the tackles for 1,309 yards and 10 touchdowns. Allen, who has had both knees surgically repaired, wants \$2 million tacked on to the \$475,000 he earned last season. Fullback Marc Logan does a solid job lead-blocking, while Reggie Brooks has been going downhill for two seasons. Brian Mitchell could fill in at tailback for a couple games, but that's his limit. **Grade: C**

RECEIVERS Henry Ellard, 35, continues to prove there is life after 30. He's had 49 receptions of 20 yards or more in the past two seasons while recording his sixth 1,000-yard season in '95. Turner knows how to use Ellard, and the veteran plays within himself. Ellard (12,163 receiving yards) should pass Art Monk this season. The excitement, though, centers around Michael Westbrook, who's capable of an 80-catch season. Missing

training camp hurt him last year, and Westbrook sat out another five games with assorted injuries. Turner compares Westbrook favorably to Michael Irvin, and that's high praise. Leslie Shepherd, like Westbrook, gobbled up yards on the end-around play while also catching a 73-yard bomb. Mitchell is a super third-down receiver. **Grade: B**

OFFENSIVE LINE Joe Patton figures to open at left tackle unless Jim Lachey makes a miracle recovery. Patton played well in his first full season, and line coach Jim Hanifan believes he has a long future. Bob Dahl, 27, replaces the solid Ray Brown at left guard. Dahl is six years younger than Brown and just as mean. There's shaky news at center, where John Gesek's career could be jeopardized by a bulging disk in his neck. This would be a huge loss because of the versatility of Gesek and because Cory Raymer hasn't yet digested all the nuances of center play to be a starter. The right side is solid with Tre Johnson and Ed Simmons overpowering defenders. Johnson figures to be a Pro Bowler soon. **Grade: B**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS Ten of the 11 starters are multimillionaires, the newest being ex-Ram Sean Gilbert, who at 26 is entering his fifth NFL season. Gilbert has had both shoulders and his right knee scoped, yet he passed Washington's physical, and the Redskins believe he guarantees they won't finish 29th in rushing defense again. Gilbert starts at right tackle alongside another ex-Ram, Marc Boutte. Sterling Palmer and Rich Owens give the Redskins some upfield push, while Ken Harvey ranks among the game's finest pass-rushing linebackers. Harvey had 7½ sacks, 17 hurries and five forced fumbles last season. Rod Stephens and Marcus Patton, the leading tackler, give Washington two rangy linebackers, and both figure to improve in their second year in a new system. Dexter Nottage makes plays and is an above-average reserve. **Grade: B**

SECONDARY Secondary coach Tom Hayes patched up the problems cornerbacks Tom Carter and Darrell Green had with Ron Lynn in '94, and Carter came through with his best NFL season. Carter had 63 solo tackles and four interceptions and played with confidence. Green remains a wily veteran, although he's lost that explosive first step. James Washington and Stanley Richard are two veteran safeties capable of making big plays. Washington was slowed by injuries last year. Hayes likes his youngsters, which include Muhammad Oliver, Scott Turner and Darryl Pounds. **Grade: B**

SPECIAL TEAMS Brian Mitchell is simply the best. He's led the NFL in all-purpose yards (4,825), punt-return average (13.4) and kick-return average (25.5) over the last two seasons. He's scored six times on punt returns. Eddie Murray's salary demands may elevate Scott Blanton in the placekicking role. Matt Turk is a solid punter. **Grade: A**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT Turner and Charley Casserly have changed the look of the Redskins. They played with 24 first- or second-year players last season, second only to Indianapolis, and the youth move should pay off. Both men received positive support from owner Jack Kent Cooke, but Turner feels he must produce a winning season to have any future here. **Grade: C**

1996 DRAFT Casserly made a smart move in the first round to land Penn State's Andre Johnson, the third-rated offensive tackle who allowed only one sack and shut out Illinois' Simeon Rice. Stephen Davis led Auburn in rushing the last two seasons and could start if Terry Allen doesn't sign. DeAndre Maxwell was San Diego State's H-back but more importantly is Ellard's nephew. **Grade: A**

SPORT RATING: B
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 9-7



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1996 OVERVIEW One of the first actions of new coach Vince Tobin was to hire a quality-control coach to put the offensive and defensive schemes into a computer, thus bringing the Cardinals out of Buddy Ryan's dark ages. Tobin, who ironically replaced Ryan before as defensive coordinator of the Bears, must upgrade the worst rushing defense (141.6 yards a game) while worrying about whether the quarterback combination of Boomer Esiason and Kent Graham, two ex-New Yorkers, will lead the Cardinals to respectability. They won't, and the Cardinals, who last qualified for the playoffs in 1982, will miss again.

QUARTERBACK Esiason, 35, is the perfect fit. He becomes the Cardinals' 12th starting quarterback since 1987 because he was younger and cheaper (\$800,000 to \$1.3 million) than David Krieg. Boomer, who recently moved to a nearby desert community, took a beating last season with the Jets. Boomer won't panic like Krieg did last season (53 sacks, 21 interceptions). Esiason has thrown 55 more touchdown passes than interceptions in his 12-year career. Also, his sidearm style suits the intermediate passing game of offensive coordinator Jim Fassel. Kent Graham, who has a strong, inaccurate throwing arm, didn't attempt a pass last season. Stoney Case has a long way to go. **Grade: D**

RUNNING BACKS There was talk of trading Garrison Hearst because he'll be a free agent next year. Hearst finally produced last season, rushing for 1,070 yards. However, he also had 12 fumbles and became the NFL's first runner ever to crack 1,000 yards and score only one rushing touchdown. Larry Centers figures to be Esiason's favorite target after catching 101 passes last year, a new NFL standard for running backs. But relying so much on Centers didn't help. Arizona had the least effective offense in the league, scoring a touchdown on just 10.4 percent of its possessions. LeShon Johnson and Ryan Terry are inexperienced backups. **Grade: B**

RECEIVERS Rob Moore and Frank Sanders are a super tandem, combining for a 15.7-yard average. Another advantage is that Moore played five seasons with the Jets, catching 78 passes from Esiason in '94. Sanders caught on fast last season, using his upper body well when charging out of breaks. Of the young players, Marcus Dowdell looked the best during spring minicamps. Stevie Anderson has a chance to stick. Oscar McBride is strictly a blocking tight end. **Grade: B**

OFFENSIVE LINE This group was poorly coached under Ryan and by last season's end was one of the worst in the league. Lomas Brown, a Pro Bowler who played 11 seasons in Detroit, opens at left tackle, and Tobin was as interested in his leadership ability as his pass-blocking skills. Tobin was debating whether to keep left guard Duval Love, who was awful last season. Frustrated by Kent Hull's presence in Buffalo, Mike Devlin is the new center. Anthony Redmon and Joe Wolf provide quality depth and reason to believe there will be improvement. They surrendered an NFL-high 55 sacks last season and rarely moved anybody in short-yardage. Tackle Larry Tharpe is now a Patriot. **Grade: F**



DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS The biggest believers in Buddy Ryan resided on this side of the ball, and for the most part, they let him down. After not allowing a 100-yard rusher in 63 games, the streak ended in the opener, and the line proceeded to allow 141 yards rushing a game. Clyde Simmons and Eric Swann had the best seasons, but they didn't generate consistent effort. Eric Hill fought with his teammates as much as with the opposition. Seth Joyner won't be free-lancing as much under Tobin, and that should be a benefit. Jamir Miller's season was ruined by a drug suspension, followed by an ankle injury. Miller has super lateral quickness. Michael Bankston is a solid tackle who simply needs to play smarter. **Grade: D**

SECONDARY Aeneas Williams, the best read-and-react cornerback in the NFC, has had 15 interceptions in two seasons, and the Pro Bowler is only 28. Williams may even be tested more this year because Lance Brown, a rookie last season, should be the starting right cornerback. Ex-Seahawk Patrick Hunter was a disaster last season at cornerback and finished on injured-reserve. Matt Darby, another hard hitter from the Bills, opens at strong safety, while Brent Alexander, who split weak safety with Terry Hoage last season, has the job to himself. Tito Paul is the lone decent reserve. **Grade: C**

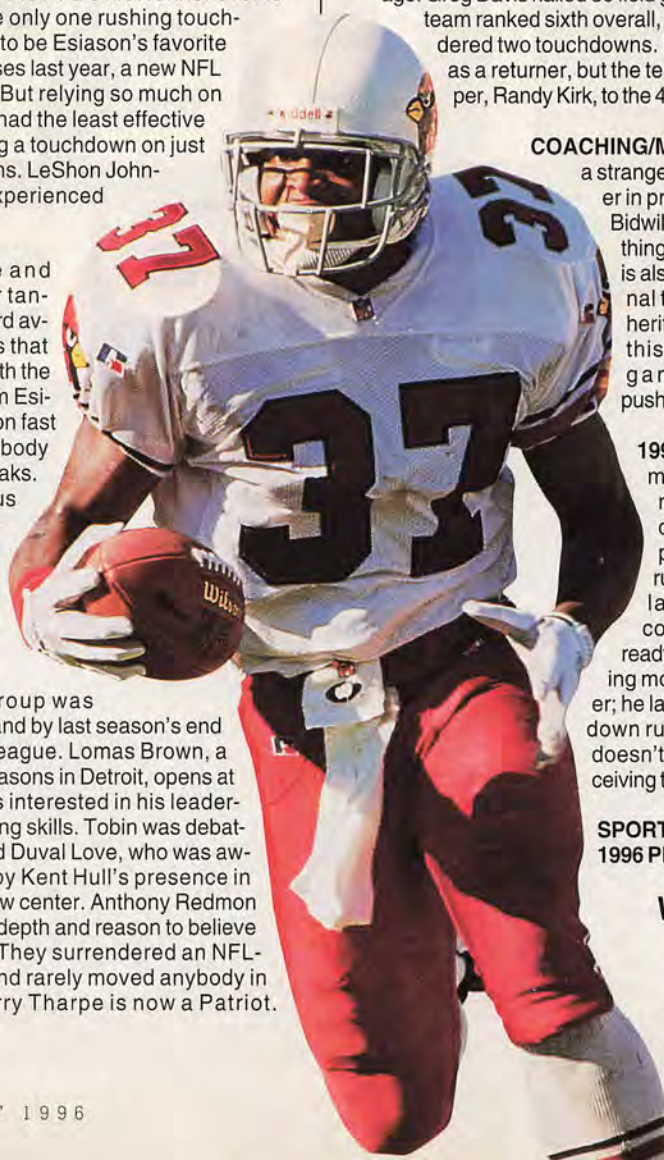
SPECIAL TEAMS Despite his team winning only four games, punter Jeff Feagles made the Pro Bowl based on his 43.8 average. Greg Davis nailed 30 field goals and the punt-coverage team ranked sixth overall, but the kickoff team surrendered two touchdowns. Ryan Terry shows promise as a returner, but the team lost its great long-snapper, Randy Kirk, to the 49ers. **Grade: B**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT There isn't a stranger, more unpredictable owner in professional sports than Billy Bidwill, but at least he did the right thing in discharging Ryan. Tobin is also strict but has a more rational touch than Ryan. Tobin inherits some talent and will have this team prepared for every game. They will not be pushovers. **Grade: C**

1996 DRAFT The club failed to make dramatic improvements because it didn't trade disgruntled Swann for a plethora of picks, while pass rusher Simeon Rice and Leeland McElroy are players comparable to what they already have. McElroy will be nothing more than a great kick returner; he lacks the size to be an every-down runner. Johnny McWilliams doesn't have the speed to be a receiving threat at tight end. **Grade: D**

SPORT RATING: D
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 6-10

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1996 OVERVIEW Last year, Coach Dan Reeves boldly predicted an 11-5 record. Reeves had the numbers right, just reversed. And those five wins came against teams with losing records. The Giants remain in management turmoil; few are convinced Reeves wouldn't have bolted had another job existed for him. They focused energy and free-agent money on retaining their own players, but how good are they? The Giants are doomed because they lack superstar players at quarterback, receiver and on defense. They have last-place talent.

QUARTERBACK Dave Brown understands pressure, accepts it and believes he can overcome it. But Reeves must allow him to sink or swim on his own. Brown didn't make mistakes that cost the team games, but he didn't make any plays to win them either. He hasn't proven he's worth \$1 million, and the Giants probably will pay triple that this season. The sad part is Brown knows that Reeves lacks confidence in him, so how can he grow? New York averaged 165.6 yards passing a game, the lowest total in the NFL last season. Meanwhile, few are convinced Brown can be the winner Phil Simms was. Tommy Maddox is the backup, and most wonder why Reeves still likes him. **Grade: D**

RUNNING BACKS San Francisco made a run at Rodney Hampton, but the Giants matched the Niners' salary offer because Tyrone Wheatley was such a rookie bust. Hampton has had five consecutive 1,000-yard seasons, and last year's total of 1,182 yards didn't include a run longer than 32 yards. Hampton is tough, dependable and a quiet leader. He'll pound inside. However, nine times the Giants had a chance to tie a game or take the lead in the fourth quarter last season and succeeded only once, in a win over Washington. Wheatley never was the game-breaker Reeves hoped he'd be, and who knows if he'll work harder. Charles Way is a bruiser at fullback, while Keith Elias is nothing more than a glorified special-teamer. **Grade: B**

RECEIVERS This remains one of the worst groups in the NFL. The Giants haven't had a Pro Bowler here since Homer Jones in 1969. Chris Calloway is a solid No. 2 guy, a possession receiver, and currently has a consecutive-games receiving streak of 41. The Giants weren't interested in having Mike Sherrard back and need Thomas Lewis, who has been healthy for only 18 games in two seasons, to emerge as the go-to receiver. The short passing game requires efficient tight ends. Aaron Pierce was solid, but Howard Cross, who has 71 consecutive starts, caught only 18 passes, his lowest total since 1990. **Grade: D**

OFFENSIVE LINE This group continued its downward spiral, allowing 46 sacks for the second consecutive season while losing left tackle Jumbo Elliott, who dominated Bruce Smith in New York's last championship game. Ron Stone, the Cowboys' best reserve lineman, replaces Elliott, while the right side should be manned by youngsters Rob Zatechka and Scott Gragg. Both players are tough but struggled against quick defenders. Center Brian Williams is much stronger than Bart Oates was, but still needs to refine his blocking adjustments under pressure. Left guard Greg Bishop is the team's best all-around lineman and always seals the back side. **Grade: D**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS A solid yet unspectacular group. Still, the Giants ranked 27th in rushing defense and lack a dominant player on the line or at linebacker. Michael Strahan and Jamal Duff have a chance to explode as pass rushers, while Keith Hamilton has inside pass-rush skills. Ray Agnew was the club's best free-agent acquisition last season. Linebacker remains a talent wasteland compared to the years when Lawrence Taylor, Harry Carson, etc. played. The starters will be especially light this season with Corey Widmer in the middle and Jessie Armstead on the weak side. Marcus Buckley has speed, but he doesn't play under control enough. Corey Miller is another starter in whom Reeves doesn't have confidence. **Grade: D**

SECONDARY The cornerbacks, Phillippi Sparks and Thomas Randolph, are solid and figure to improve. Sparks is a top-five corner while Randolph has super speed but simply needs to improve his reaction. Free safety Vencie Glenn held the group together last season. Glenn will make plays but remains a step slow. Jason Sehorn and Tito Wooten will put pressure on Jesse Campbell, who is strictly a run-enforcing safety. **Grade: C**

SPECIAL TEAMS Brad Daluiso had an erratic season. He missed two kicks that could have won games and didn't reach the end zone on kick-offs as much as he should have. Mike Horan excels at directional punting, and his strong leg produced a 42.5-yard gross average. The return game was nonexistent last season and needs a spark. **Grade: D**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT Tension remains between Reeves and general manager George Young. The Giants don't deal with controversy well, and they haven't been as aggressive as they should have been in free agency. This is a flagship franchise in a great endorsement city with super ownership, but those intangibles haven't attracted any superstars. **Grade: C**

1996 DRAFT New York wanted to trade out of the fifth spot once Jonathan Ogden was taken. Then Reeves wasn't thrilled the pick was used on Oklahoma end Cedric Jones because he doesn't figure to crack the lineup. Amani Toomer has 4.4 speed, can return kicks and might be the deep receiving threat Dave Brown needs. Florida State quarterback Danny Kanell has the deep touch that Brown could use. **Grade: C**

SPORT RATING: D
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 4-12



Rodney Hampton's '96 playoff hopes ended when New York matched the 49ers' salary offer.



VINCENT MANNILLO/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

Brett Favre shook loose for more than 4,000 yards passing, 38 touchdowns and one MVP.

1996 OVERVIEW The Packers have closed the gap on everyone except the Cowboys. Coach Mike Holmgren has lost six straight games to Dallas, all in Texas Stadium, and this year's game in Irving should be a barometer of the Packers' season. Green Bay ranks among the NFL's top five clubs, primarily because of quarterback Brett Favre and defensive end Reggie White. The Packers simply don't have enough dominant players to win the Super Bowl, but they're awfully close. It helps that they've won 13 of their last 14 games in Lambeau Field. They need to get the Cowboys on grass.

QUARTERBACK Favre played like an MVP last season, which is just what he was. His 38 touchdowns were the NFL's third-best total, and he was big in the clutch. He had a 100.6 rating in the fourth quarter, and the Packers completed 49 percent of their third downs, the NFL's best mark last year. In his last two seasons, Favre has 71 touchdown passes and only 27 interceptions. He struggled in the NFC championship game, trying to do too much and being a bit uptight. He'll do much better next time around. Jim McMahon returns as the backup with the departure of Ty Detmer, and Doug Peterson has some talent. **Grade: A+**

RUNNING BACKS Edgar Bennett never fumbles, nor does he break the long run. Granted, Bennett was hampered by a sore ankle last season, but his 3.4 average was the lowest among 1,000-yard rushers. He's a converted fullback who can catch (61 receptions, only three drops) and has a sweeping running style that suits this offense. However, Bennett can't move the pile. Dorsey Levens was a better third-down player than Bennett. Levens will get the ball more this year. William Henderson is a blocking fullback, while rookie Chris Darkins has more speed than Bennett. **Grade: C+**



RECEIVERS Imagine how good Green Bay would be if Sterling Sharpe hadn't been forced into retirement. Robert Brooks had a sensational season with 102 catches for 1,497 yards, a total higher than even Sharpe's best season. Also, Brooks has become a Lambeau favorite with his leaps into the front row of the stands after touchdowns. Anthony Morgan and Mark Ingram combined for 70 receptions, while Mark Chmura has developed into a Pro Bowl tight end. It doesn't look like Keith Jackson will make a return visit, but Favre has enough targets. The coaches think Antonio Freeman could have a 70-catch season. **Grade: B**

OFFENSIVE LINE This group has had six new starters in three seasons, with left tackle Ken Ruettggers and center Frank Winters the lone mainstays. Ruettggers, who will be 34 in August, remains a solid pass blocker, while Winters is a holder, grabber and all-around Favre sidekick. It's critical that Aaron Taylor return from knee surgery by August, or left guard will be a mess. Gary Brown isn't ready. Adam Timmerman, who subbed for Taylor, will switch to right guard for the departed Harry Galbreath. Timmerman is a muscle man. Earl Dotson can be a dominating run blocker, but this group needs work on pass blocking. **Grade: C-**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS Ex-Bear Ron Cox will open in the middle after playing the last two seasons as a strong-side linebacker. Gilbert Brown will make fans forget John Jurkovic; he can be dominating against the run. Santana Dotson will work as an inside pass rusher, while Darius Holland and Bob Kuberski will rotate next to Brown. The main guys, though, are Reggie White and Sean Jones, who combined for 21 sacks. White was an inspirational leader last season, playing hurt a lot, while Jones stepped up when White was down. Matt LaBounty is a promising pass rusher. Outside linebackers Wayne Simmons and George Koonce must start making more plays. **Grade: A-**

SECONDARY The Packers surrendered 314 points, but you must remember that this division has become pass-happy. Three 4,000-yard QBs hail from the Central, and Chicago's Erik Kramer just missed. Free safety George Teague needs to improve his game, while young cornerbacks Doug Evans and Craig Newsome have promising futures. The defense ranked 14th overall but had the NFC's lowest third-down conversion rate (35 percent). LeRoy Butler led the team with five interceptions and should have had five more. Mike Prior, Keith Crawford and Lenny McGill provide adequate depth. **Grade: C**

SPECIAL TEAMS Placekicker Chris Jacke is coming off his worst season. He can be reliable, but he needs to get his head out of the clouds. Craig Hentrich is a solid punter who capably relieved Jacke several times. Hentrich knows how to kick in freezing weather. Antonio Freeman sparked as a returner, and he could draw double duty again because Miami signed Charles Jordan away. **Grade: B**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT Holmgren and GM Ron Wolf rank among the NFL's best, and club president Bob Harlan gives them free rein. However, negotiator Mike Reinfeldt doesn't approve all their moves because he worries too much about the bottom line. Holmgren's playoff victory over the 49ers in his hometown was sweet, and he'll only improve. **Grade: A**

1996 DRAFT A lot of other teams thought USC's John Michels, who started one year at left tackle, was a reach. However, some thought Notre Dame's Derrick Mayes was a better receiver than Terry Glenn. Minnesota running back Darkins is familiar with the Packers' spread offense. **Grade: B**

SPORT RATING: A
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 11-5

1996 OVERVIEW The Lions lost locker-room leaders Lomas Brown and Chris Spielman, but that's life in the NFL. They still return the nucleus of last season's best offense, one that shattered every team record. The defense figures to play better this year because the internal coaching differences have been worked out. We repeat this every year, but it's critical that head man Wayne Fontes start fast instead of waiting until Thanksgiving to make his patented charge. Given a good start, Detroit should be a playoff team again.

QUARTERBACK Our last vivid memory of Scott Mitchell's '95 season was of him self-destructing in the Philadelphia playoff defeat, but give the guy a break; he's only started 32 NFL games and will learn to discard his tunnel vision. He broke virtually all of Bobby Layne's records last season while passing for 4,338 yards and 32 touchdowns. He had five 300-yard games, and included in the team's seven-game winning streak was a 410-yard, four-touchdown effort against Minnesota. Tom Moore, the offensive coordinator, altered the scheme to suit the players' demands. Mitchell still isn't comfortable being a team leader; that will come with time, and he shouldn't force the issue. Don Majkowski is a solid backup who knows the division well. **Grade: B+**

RUNNING BACKS Barry Sanders cruised past 10,000 yards last season and remains the game's best all-around running back. He had five touchdown runs of 20 yards or more. Sanders now has 47 100-yard games and seven 1,000-yard seasons. He figures to again reach 1,500 yards while sharing time with ex-Bronco Glyn Milburn, who has similar darting moves and should excel running inside the Silverdome. **Grade: A+**

RECEIVERS This has become the scariest group for any NFL secondary. The Lions led the league with 73 plays of 20 yards or more. Granted, the Eagles were able to triple-team Herman Moore in the playoff loss, but only because Brett Perriman went down and Mitchell panicked. Moore is physical and difficult to defend because of his size and leaping ability. Perriman explodes out of his breaks as well as anyone. He caught 32 third-down passes to Moore's 25; both caught 20 balls of at least 20 yards. Combined, they had 231 receptions for 3,174 yards. Tight end David Sloan has great downfield separation. Johnnie Morton would start on a dozen teams. **Grade: A+**

OFFENSIVE LINE Having lost three starters and concerned over the contentment of center Kevin Glover, who was hit with a huge salary reduction, coach Paul Boudreau has his hands full. Left tackle Lomas Brown was the biggest loss. Brown might have lost his punch, but he remains a super pass blocker. Mike Compton and Scott Conover must secure the guard spots unless Dave Lutz returns for a lot less money. If that doesn't happen, draftee Jeff Hartings, a tremendous guard at Penn State, might move into the lineup. Zefross Moss is a solid right tackle who only missed two games last season. **Grade: D**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS Robert Porcher got a rude free-agency jolt: Every team refused to pay him big money. The good news for the Lions is that John Teerlinck keeps his front four intact, one that helped increase sack production from 28 two years ago to 42 last season. Luther Ellis will shift to the under tackle, next to Henry Thomas, while Porcher will move outside, where his quick-

ness will be better served. Porcher needs to approach double-digit sacks, as Thomas and Tracy Scroggins did last season. The Lions replaced Spielman with ex-Giant Michael Brooks. No. 1 pick Reggie Brown will crack the lineup, but there's plenty of depth with Antonio London, Mike Johnson and Tracy Hayworth. The Lions won't be 23rd on defense this season. **Grade: B**

SECONDARY The pass rush better materialize because a slow-footed secondary is questionable. Strong safety Bennie Blades doesn't close like he used to. Van Malone shifts to free safety where Willie Clay used to save the day. Clay, now in New England, had eight interceptions last season. Left cornerback Ryan McNeil often rattles under pressure. Corey Raymond has developed into the best defender. Raymond defended 25 passes and ended up with six interceptions. Sean Vanhorne and Ron Rice need to improve. **Grade: D**

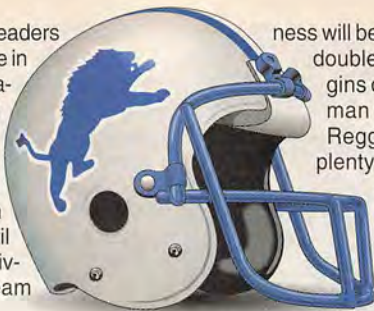
SPECIAL TEAMS Returns by committee didn't succeed last season, but all that changes with the arrival of Milburn, who averaged 27 yards on kickoffs last season and could set an all-purpose-yards record this year. Kicker Jason Hanson rebounded from a shaky '94 season to miss only six of 34 field goal attempts and drill a 56-yarder. He also gave the defense a chance. With his booming kickoffs, opponents' average starting spot was the 26-yard line, third best in the league. Punter Mark Royals had two kicks blocked. **Grade: A-**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT Owner William Clay Ford has taken a more active role in team affairs, and he won't be as tolerant of Fontes as his father. Most of the fans wanted Fontes ousted after the Lions lost their third consecutive wild-card playoff game. Chuck Schmidt is an underrated general manager, while Ron Hughes has a great eye for personnel. **Grade: C**

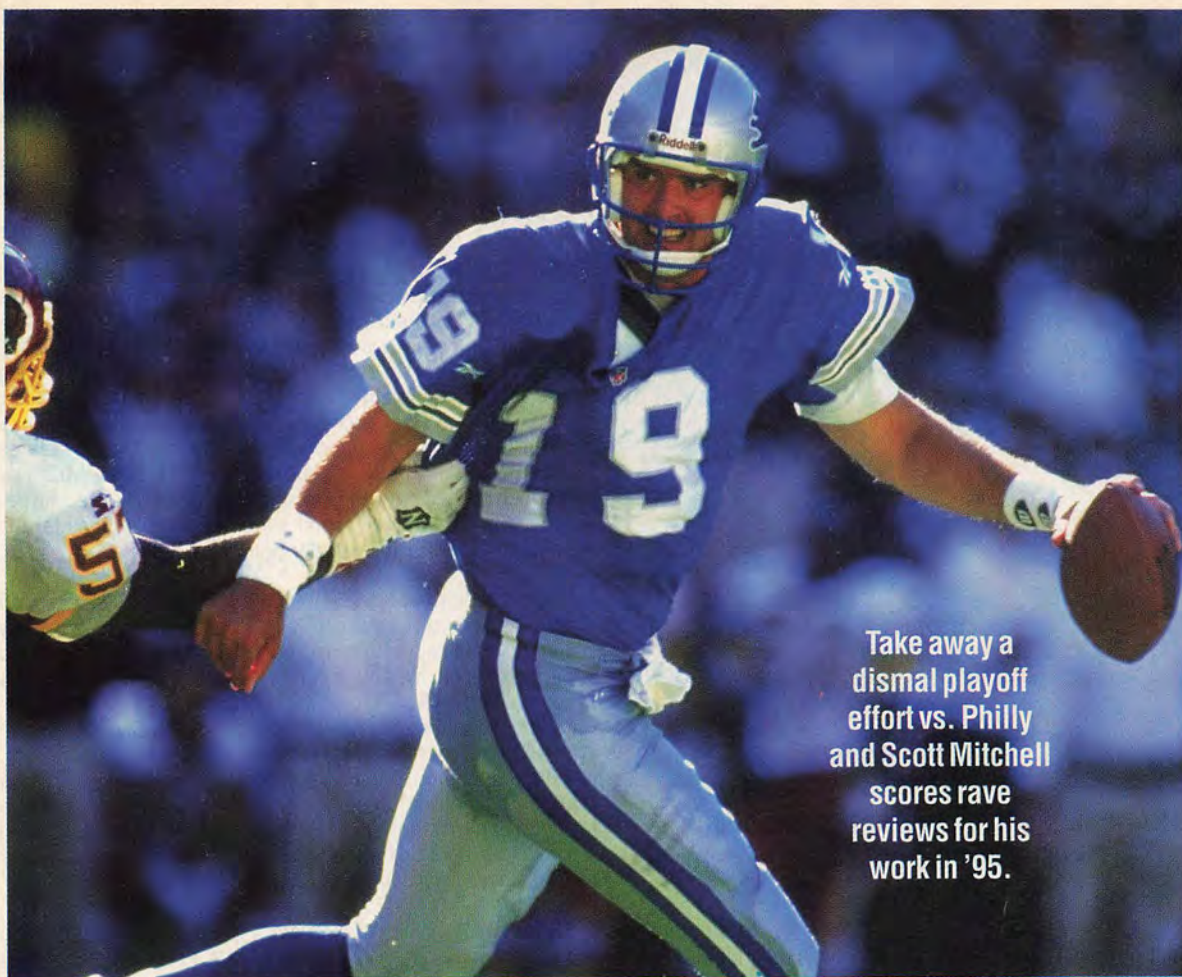
1996 DRAFT Outside linebacker Reggie Brown was the defender Jimmy Johnson wanted in Miami, and everyone says the 240-pounder will continue to improve. Guard Jeff Hartings was the only offensive player taken, and he could move into the starting lineup. Georgia Tech safety Ryan Stewart should impact a weak secondary. **Grade: A**

SPORT RATING: B
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 9-7

Expect more brilliance from Barry Sanders, who has had seven straight 1,000-yard seasons.



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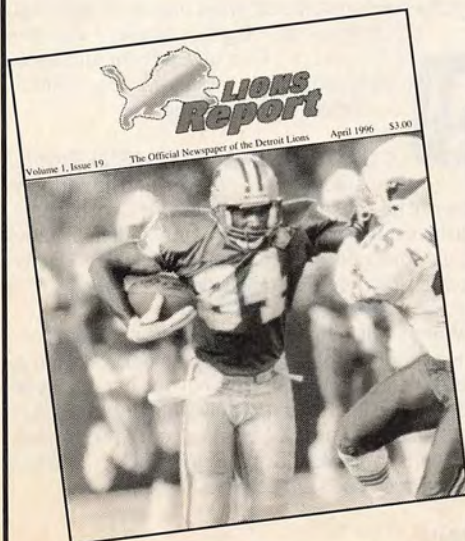


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A familiar sight for Bears fans: speedster Curtis Conway waving goodbye to a defender.

1996 OVERVIEW Figure this: The Bears, led by a defensive-minded coach in Dave Wannstedt, have a much-improved offense. They scored 158 more points and gained 1,956 more yards last season than in '93. And they could miss the playoffs again this season because they simply don't generate enough of a pass rush. That's a killer when facing 4,000-yard quarterbacks like Brett Favre, Scott Mitchell and Warren Moon six times a season.

QUARTERBACK Erik Kramer started fast, winning six of eight games, but his passing couldn't stop the defensive slide. He set team marks for attempts (522), completions (315), yards (3,838) and touchdowns (29). Kramer also had a streak of 174 attempts without an interception, finishing with only 10, and was sacked an NFL-low 15 times. He has become a solid quarterback, but he'll never win a duel with Favre or Troy Aikman, and that's how championships are won. Kramer will have to take every snap again this season because Steve Stenstrom and Shane Matthews are too inexperienced. **Grade: C**

RUNNING BACKS Believe it, the offense would have been better last season if fullback Raymont Harris hadn't broken his collarbone. With Harris returning, the pressure won't be on second-year back Rashaan Salaam, who fumbled eight times as a rookie. Salaam, though, did rush for 1,074 yards and had more carries (296) than Walter Payton (196) had in his first year. Salaam displayed his power by converting nine of 10 third-and-one situations. Harris, who is a great lead blocker, can catch and turn the corner. Tony Carter and Robert Green are above-average reserves, meaning the running game is in good hands. **Grade: B+**

RECEIVERS In a salary cap-unfriendly decision, Wannstedt chose Curtis Conway over Jeff Graham, who became the first Bear in 26 seasons with 1,000 receiving yards. Conway got the

\$10 million contract, while Graham, who finished with 1,301 yards, signed with the Jets. Conway, two years younger than Graham, is the better deep threat, averaging almost 17 yards a catch and 12 touchdowns last year. Conway has more explosion than Michael Timpson, whose production nosedived (74 catches in '94, 24 in '95). Timpson never adjusted to Kramer. Second-round pick Bobby Engram will open camp as the third receiver, ahead of Jack Jackson, who caught one pass (in pre-season) last year. **Grade: C**

OFFENSIVE LINE Coach Tony Wise has done a remarkable job, but his deeds are not done. Wise wanted to retain center Jerry Fontenot, but the cap forced him to sign ex-Cardinal Ed Cunningham simply because Cunningham was cheaper. Todd Burger and Todd Perry are solid plugger types at guard and two big reasons why the Bears had an NFL-low nine holding penalties. Left tackle Andy Heck isn't flashy, but he is dependable and quick on his feet. Wise has made a super right tackle out of James Williams, a former defensive lineman, and the Bears were forced to match a \$9.2 million offer for him. Evan Pilgrim is the lone dependable backup, as former second-round choice Marcus Spears has been a major disappointment. **Grade: B**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS It comes down to this: If ex-Dolphin Bryan Cox can have half the impact Mike Singletary and Dick Butkus had in their greatest seasons, the Bears could win the division. It's a huge burden for one player, but that's why he received a \$5 million signing bonus. Cox has great range, super instincts and doesn't miss many tackles. Jim Flanigan and Chris Zorich are undersized tackles with huge motors. Alonzo Spellman, one of the NFL's most physically imposing athletes, finally made an impact last season, and his best is ahead of him. Linebackers Joe Cain and Vinson Smith both turn 31 and are on the down slope. Nickel linebacker Barry Minter loves to hit people. **Grade: C**

SECONDARY When cornerback Donnell Woolford suffered a hip injury, missing the final seven games, the Bears' secondary became an easy mark. The pressure, though, is on No. 1 pick Walt Harris, who must start at right cornerback. Wannstedt has no confidence in Jeremy Lincoln and Kevin Miniefield. James Burton has developed into the nickel back. Marty Carter led the team with 158 tackles, the most ever by a Bears safety. Mark Carrier failed to make a significant play at free safety, illustrated by his zero interceptions. **Grade: C**

SPECIAL TEAMS Kevin Butler missed a 44-yard field goal that would have beaten Pittsburgh, and the season went sour from there. The kicking game was awful as Butler converted only two field goals beyond 40 yards, while rookie punter Todd Sauerbrun's 37.8 gross average was the NFL's worst. Rookie Engram and Jack Jackson figure to replace Graham/Timpson on kick returns. **Grade: F**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT This is Wannstedt's fourth season, and he expects to win the division. If he doesn't, he and team president Michael McCaskey will have much to talk about; Wannstedt has made most of the critical personnel decisions. Meanwhile, McCaskey continues his search for a new stadium. **Grade: B**

1996 DRAFT Wannstedt fell in love with Mississippi State cornerback Walt Harris while coaching in the Senior Bowl. Harris played both corner and safety during his college career. He is physical and breaks on the ball extremely well. Engram averaged almost 100 receiving yards a game last year while playing in weather conditions similar to those at Soldier Field. Chris Villarrial and Jon Clark are Wise's project picks. **Grade: A**

SPORT RATING: B
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 9-7





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1996 OVERVIEW Success hinges on the development of quarterback Trent Dilfer, who has played poorly in two straight seasons. The Bucs are coming off their best season in 13 years, although 7-9 would be a downer in most circles. The offbeat Sam Wyche has been replaced by good-guy head coach Tony Dungy, who is very familiar with the division and capable of building a winner. But the division, the most competitive in the NFC, is too tough for Dungy to perform a miracle this year.

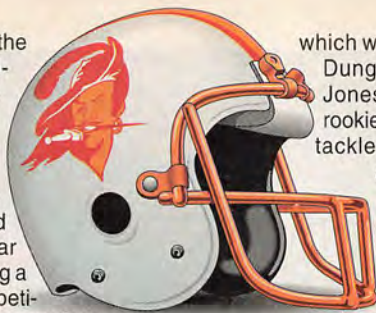
QUARTERBACK Dilfer placed much of the blame for his 18 interceptions and four touchdowns on the departing Wyche, believing the coach simply had no confidence in him and never allowed him to cut loose. Dilfer's size and strong arm were never factors because of his poor decision-making. New offensive coordinator Mike Shula wants to develop a quick-read, quick-release offense. Dilfer could struggle because he prefers to hold the ball. Casey Weldon got his chance but struggled. **Grade: F**

RUNNING BACKS Errict Rhett is demanding a renegotiation of his contract after rushing for 2,218 yards and 18 touchdowns in two seasons. Rhett follows his blocks well and squares his shoulders when accelerating through a hole. Tracy Johnson figures to open at fullback, but he'll be pressed by Purdue rookie Mike Alstott, who was a dominant collegiate runner. **Grade: B**

RECEIVERS Alvin Harper averaged \$54,400 a reception last season, which is pretty good money if you can get it. He only caught two TDs and was ejected after one of them for arguing with an official who had initially ruled him out of bounds. Jackie Harris, 28, finally played a full season and led the club with 62 receptions, the most ever by a Bucs tight end. Horace Copeland and Lawrence Dawsey can be big-play receivers, but Dawsey missed four games, and Dilfer was lost without him. This group went one 11-game stretch with only one touchdown. **Grade: C**

OFFENSIVE LINE Left tackle Paul Gruber opens with a streak of 39 consecutive starts after suffering through '95 with a bad shoulder. Chris Foerster, who left the Vikings with Dungy, will make some alterations because this group did allow 56 sacks, the NFL's second-highest total. Scott Dill will move to left guard, opening up right tackle for young Scott Adams, who was signed away from the Bears, or Florida rookie Jason Odom. Tony Mayberry returns at center, while Ian Beckles has struggled at right guard against quick pass rushers. **Grade: F**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS Two rookies, pass rusher Regan Upshaw and tackle Marcus Jones, figure to start for a unit that generated only 45 sacks the past two seasons. Eric Curry went 15 games without a sack, notching two in the season finale. Curry will line up left, or strong side, this year,



which will allow Upshaw to attack from the weak side. Dungy plans to move Upshaw around while pairing Jones inside with Warren Sapp, who struggled as a rookie. Hardy Nickerson had his third consecutive 100-tackle season and decided against testing the free-agent market. Outside linebacker Derrick Brooks has a great future, while Demetrius DuBose has been a bust. **Grade: C**

SECONDARY This group lacks a player who can shut down the opponent's best weapon.

Right corner Charles Dimry returns from his best season. Martin Mayhew slipped into bad habits, never really challenging receivers. Melvin Johnson and John Lynch figure to be the safeties. Ex-Cowboy Thomas Everett is coming off two disappointing years here; ditto for Tony Stargell. Dungy wants to build a turnover-producing unit, his trademark. **Grade: D**

SPECIAL TEAMS Million-dollar punter Reggie Roby finished with a 42.8 gross average. Michael Husted kicked three game-winning field goals and was 3-for-3 beyond 50 yards. Bobby Joe Edmonds had a solid year in the dual capacity of punt and kick returner, but Tennessee rookie Nilo Silvan will press him. **Grade: B**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT Owner Malcolm Glazer will help build a new stadium but isn't receiving much political support. Soft-spoken Dungy deserved a chance after so many great seasons as a defensive coordinator. General manager Rich McKay and personnel man Jerry Angelo have developed into solid football people. **Grade: B**

1996 DRAFT Regan Upshaw had more than 20 sacks in his last two seasons at Cal and should be strictly a rusher this season. Marcus Jones has the build and strength to be a run stopper inside. Fourth-rounder Jason Odom could start at right tackle, while Purdue fullback Mike Alstott averaged 131 yards rushing as a senior. The Bucs also picked up San Diego's first-round choice in '97 for a '96 second. **Grade: A+**

SPORT RATING: C
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 6-10

The downside of durable Errict Rhett's emergence is his demands for a renegotiated contract.



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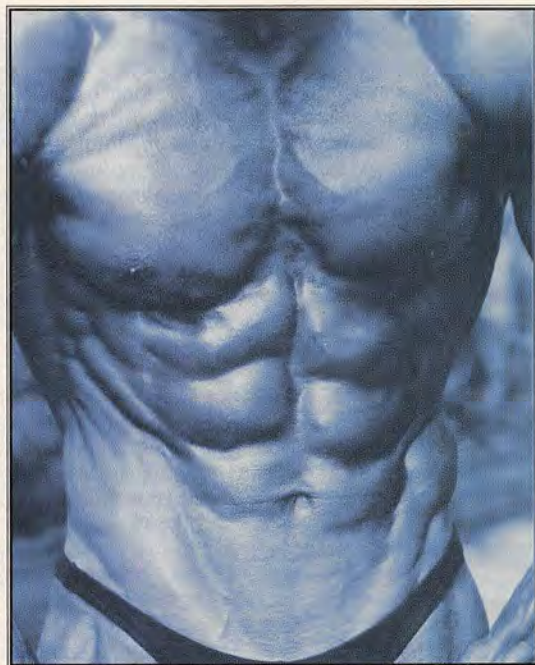
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1996 OVERVIEW This could be coach Dennis Green's final season. His personnel continues to decline, and he owns an 0-3 record in playoff games. The Vikings were 3-5 in the Central last season, Green's worst division record after losing only six of 24 games in three years. The defense has gotten younger and also loses Tony Dungy's game-planning. Warren Moon, who will turn 40 in November, must carry the team again, and he's 90-90 in career starts.

QUARTERBACK With his spousal abuse troubles behind him, Moon enters the season focused on simply winning. He lost his TNT broadcasting job, which proved to be a distraction much of last season. Moon ranks fourth on the NFL's all-time passing list (42,177 yards), but it doesn't make sense for him to be averaging 38 attempts a game at age 40. Still, Moon threw for 33 touchdowns and will keep his team in most games. This was the highest-scoring team in Vikings history last season, and Moon completed half of his touchdown passes on third down. Brad Johnson and Chad May are kids deserving of some playing time. **Grade: B**

RUNNING BACKS The Vikings made a mistake by allowing Terry Allen to leave. Robert Smith, Allen's replacement, missed half the season with an ankle injury. Smith had a 4.5-yard average and comes equipped with the speed to turn any corner, yet he's never been durable. Scottie Graham is a decent backup, but he struggles when pressed into service. James Stewart, a fifth-rounder last season, led the team in rushing in two games and will be given a shot at Smith's job. Amp Lee caught 71 passes as the third-down back. **Grade: D**

RECEIVERS Cris Carter has caught a pass in 67 consecutive games. Amazingly, he had 122 receptions in each of the last two seasons, further proving his durability. Carter, who had 17 touchdowns, is virtually impossible to stop on the quick slant because he can't be intimidated by a linebacker. Jake Reed has deep speed and is the perfect complement to Carter. The hope is for David Palmer, who was a daily workout visitor in the off-season, to supplant Qadry Ismail as the third receiver. Ismail drops too many passes. With Adrian Cooper gone, Andrew Jordan becomes the No. 1 tight end. **Grade: A**

OFFENSIVE LINE Minnesota is one of the few teams that returns its offensive line intact. Randall McDaniel, center Jeff Christy and Todd Steussie have started every game since the outset of the '94 season. Christy hasn't missed a start since his junior year in high school. McDaniel has been to the Pro Bowl seven consecutive seasons and may be the finest left guard in football. Quick off the ball, he dominates larger men. Steussie is improving his pass drop, but doesn't sustain enough blocks. Corey Stringer is the NFL's second-youngest starter (22) and needs to add muscle. John Gerak replaced the retired Chris Hinton at right guard. **Grade: C**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS Foge Fazio, the new defensive coordinator, could have four new starters among his front seven. Gone are Roy Barker, Broderick Thomas and Jack Del Rio, while tackle Esera Tuaolo is coming off a torn Achilles tendon. John Randle is the star of the outfit, but he was only the 12th-leading tackler last season despite a team-high 10½ sacks, and he can get shoved around inside. The hope is that No. 1 pick Duane Clemons can be worked into the lineup, allowing Fernando Smith to slide inside Randle. This would put Clemons and disappointing Derrick Alexander on the outside. Such a front line would average under 270 pounds. Dixon Edwards left the Cowboys to play strong-side linebacker, while Jeff Brady, quicker than Del Rio, moves into the middle. Eddie McDaniel, who has more range than anybody, led the Vikes last season with 98 solo tackles, 34 more than the nearest teammate. **Grade: D**

SECONDARY The defense slipped to 20th overall, 28th against

the pass, while allowing 385 points, the most by a Vikings team since 1984. The secondary started two rookies last season: Corey Fuller was toast at left cornerback, but free safety Orlando Thomas led the NFL with nine interceptions. With their 25 interceptions, the Vikings led the NFC with a +11 turnover differential.

What Minnesota needs is for Fuller and Dewayne Washington, who suffered a sophomore slump, to improve their bump techniques and anticipate better. Harlon Bennett replaces Charles Mincy, who will be a tough act to follow. **Grade: D**

SPECIAL TEAMS After missing only three kicks inside 50 yards in '94, Fuad Reveiz missed four inside the 40 last season. The Vikings are looking for someone to push him this summer. Mike Saxon remains only an average punter. On the positive side, David Palmer's 13.2 punt-return average led the NFL, while Qadry Ismail ranked eighth with a 24.7 kickoff average. Both are capable of breaking one at any time. **Grade: B**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT There continues to be a general unease between Green and club president Roger Headrick, who expects better results. As a former CEO, Headrick is a bottom-line manager who spends most of his time on improving stadium income. Frank Gilliam and Jerry Reichow rank among the best personnel judges in the NFL. **Grade: C**

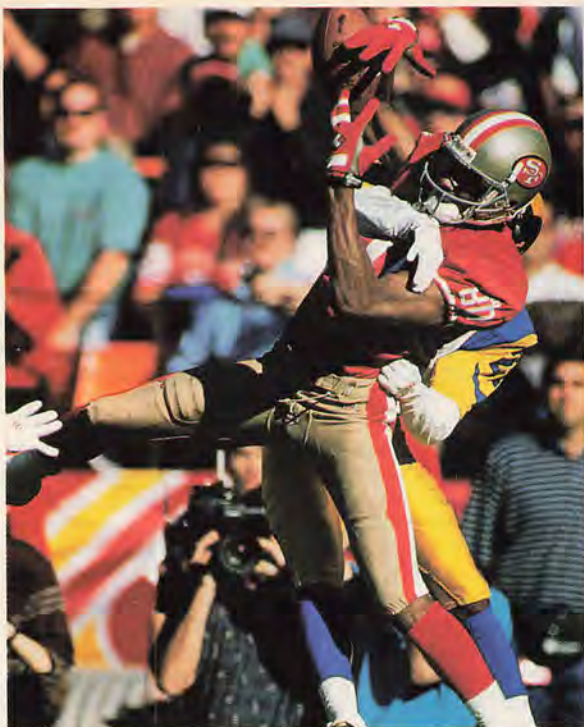
1996 DRAFT A pass rusher who must improve his arm strength, Duane Clemons is considered by some to be a 'tweener. James Manley, a solid 320, could be the run plugger the Vikings sorely need at tackle. Moe Williams rushed for 1,600 yards last season at Kentucky. He's durable and will play hurt. Hunter Goodwin figures to be the blocking tight end this season. **Grade: B**

SPORT RATING: D

1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 5-11



After a stormy off-season, Warren Moon can now focus on making the Vikings competitive.



ROB TRINGALI JR./SPORTSCROME

Jerry Rice needs some help from his friends if the 49ers hope to return to the Super Bowl.

1996 OVERVIEW San Francisco will win at least 10 games for the 14th consecutive season and the NFC West for the 13th time in the last 16 seasons. But the rest of the division is catching up to the 49ers, who keep losing quality players because of salary-cap considerations. The Niners attacked the problem by signing 10 free agents, a high number for them, concentrating on players with bulk, a Dallas trademark. The return of Bill Walsh should make a positive impact on pliable offensive coordinator Marc Trestman, but what about George Seifert? And they're rolling the dice with Johnny Johnson at running back.

QUARTERBACK The best thing about Steve Young going down with injury last season was that the 49ers discovered they can win with Elvis Grbac, who beat both Troy Aikman and Dan Marino. Young, who missed five games with a bum throwing shoulder, still was clutch, completing 68.3 percent of his third-down attempts. Because of the pounding he suffered, Young panicked a lot, leading to poor decisions. Grbac, who has a better deep touch, actually had a higher quarterback rating than Young. Trestman failed where his predecessor, Mike Shanahan, succeeded: halftime adjustments. Young still has three good seasons in him if the offensive line can protect him. **Grade: A**

RUNNING BACKS Johnny Johnson, who didn't want to play for San Francisco last season, had a change of heart, and some scouts believe he's ideal for the West Coast offense, potentially the Niners' best back since Roger Craig. Johnson, a 220-pounder, has averaged 815 yards rushing in five pro seasons, and he had 109 receptions in two seasons with the Jets. Johnson should supplant Derek Loville, who touched the ball 305 times last season, including 87 receptions, and scored 13 touchdowns. With fullback William "Bar None" Floyd not expected to return until November after surgery on his right knee, ex-Brown Tommy Vardell starts at fullback. Vardell, though, has been banged up much of his career. **Grade: C**

RECEIVERS The greatest attribute of Jerry Rice, who turns 34 in October, is that he is as fit and fast as a 24-year-old. Rice, a work-

out marvel, is coming off his finest season in 11 years, with 122 receptions for 1,848 yards and 15 touchdowns. Rice will continue to be the focus until J.J. Stokes proves he can have the impact John Taylor did. Stokes must improve his separation skills and become mentally tougher. Tight end Brent Jones took a beating last season, and his 9.9-yard receiving average was three yards below his career mark. To improve the blocking game, Adrian Cooper was signed away from Minnesota. Cooper, a 260-pounder, has had 86 receptions the last five seasons. **Grade: A+**

OFFENSIVE LINE Two starters, Steve Wallace and Bart Oates, were jettisoned, but Jesse Sapolu, an 11-year veteran, returns at center. Ray Brown, a powerful former Hog, will be the left guard, alongside last season's surprise, Kirk Scrafford. Coach Bobb McKittrick doesn't know what he wants to do at right guard, where Chris Dalman figures to edge out Rod Minstead and Tim Hanshaw. Derrick Deese might return, but he's missed 65 percent of the games the past three seasons. Harris Barton is the team leader at right tackle, but this is a unit in transition. **Grade: B**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS Chris Doleman, 35 in October, opens at the "elephant" position, the pass-rushing end role Rickey Jackson held last season. Rookie Israel Ifeanyi will work behind Doleman. The 49ers are loaded up the middle, where Dana Stubblefield and Bryant Young reside. Stubblefield and Young are the best tackle combination in the NFL against the run, which allows the 49ers to experiment on the outside. Roy Barker, coming over from Minnesota, will put his 290 pounds to work at right end. Ken Norton Jr. and Gary Plummer were the 1-2 tacklers on the club last season. Norton scored two touchdowns off interceptions. Lee Woodall has great instincts at weak-side linebacker and will take his play to another level. **Grade: A**

SECONDARY Essentially, the 49ers play with three safeties and a gambling, inexperienced cornerback in Tyrone Drakeford. On the heels of Deion Sanders' exit a year ago, Eric Davis bolted this off-season. Marquez Pope is a natural safety at right corner. He's best in man coverage, where he can muscle a receiver. Merton Hanks ranks among the best free safeties, while Tim McDonald started strongly only to fade down the stretch. The 49ers led the NFL with 26 interceptions and had the best inside-the-20 defense, allowing only 15 TDs on 46 possessions. **Grade: B**

SPECIAL TEAMS After Doug Brien choked last season, Jeff Wilkins signed and converted all 11 kicks inside 40 yards. Punter Tommy Thompson had an awful 33.7 net average, which could improve with special-team signings such as Curtis Buckley, who was given a \$300,000 signing bonus to leave Tampa Bay, and long snapper Randy Kirk. Dexter Carter stopped fumbling and remains a game-breaker on returns. **Grade: C**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT For players, this is a first-class franchise. Owner Eddie DeBartolo is moving to the Bay area, and all he's interested in is winning Super Bowls. President Carmen Policy ranks among the NFL's smartest and most-liked problem solvers. Walsh's presence will never make Seifert feel comfortable. **Grade: A**



1996 DRAFT Fearful that Stokes might not develop, the 49ers took Terrell Owens, a 6-3, 220-pound receiver from Tennessee-Chatanooga, in hope that his superior small-school skills will develop the way Rice's did. After they spent millions on Doleman, it didn't make much sense for the 49ers to move up and draft his projected replacement, USC's Ifeanyi. Then they did a cute thing and drafted twin brothers Sean and Sam Manuel, who will be training-camp feature-story material. **Grade: D**

SPORT RATING: A
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 10-6

**NFC
WEST**

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

1

1996 OVERVIEW The Falcons have only to win a few road games to earn a second consecutive playoff berth. They were 7-1 in the Georgia Dome last year and in the last five seasons own the NFL's ninth-best home record. Atlanta also needs its defense to quit being a sieve; it allowed 56 pass plays of 20 yards or more last season and an NFL-record 4,751 yards. June Jones has proven to be a remarkable offensive coach, assimilating hardheaded Jeff George into his run-and-shoot ways. The Falcons could have been 13-3 last season, but they blew four fourth-quarter leads. If the Falcons discover a knockout punch, look out 49ers!

QUARTERBACK This statistic will blow you away: Despite a concussion and a bone chip in his ankle, George has started 43 straight games, the NFL's second-longest current streak. George, whose 2.87 interception percentage ranks eighth all time, had a hot hand last year, at one point completing 24 of 25 attempts. He had four 300-yard games and finished with 4,134 yards, the NFL's fourth-highest total. Although the offense and Jones may be the best thing for his career, George has always acted as if he wants out of Atlanta. Bobby Hebert is satisfied with his backup role. **Grade: B+**

RUNNING BACKS Craig "Ironhead" Heyward was a monster, averaging 4.56 yards a carry while producing 32 runs of 10 yards or more and accounting for 85 first downs. Heyward was a model citizen, making his 250-pound weight every week as he set personal bests in yards (1,083) and receptions (37). It's a huge drop-off from Ironhead to Jamal Anderson. **Grade: B**

RECEIVERS Atlanta had 62 pass plays of 20 yards or more last season and Eric Metcalf had 17 of them. Metcalf finished with 104 receptions for 1,189 yards and 10 touchdowns. The Falcons produced four 1,000-yard performers, an NFL first, and three of them were receivers: Metcalf, Terance Mathis and Bert Emanuel. Mathis and Emanuel finished '95 with the identical total of 1,039 yards. Mathis excels in the slot, but he was haggling over a new contract this off-season before re-signing, failing to realize that the offense inflates most players' stats. Metcalf should match or improve on last year's totals, while Tyrone Brown has the speed to work the outside and triple his 17 catches of last season. J.J. Birden remains in the fold and has sure hands. Mitch Lyons is the tight end when they use one. **Grade: A**

OFFENSIVE LINE The Falcons committed \$15 million to left tackle Bob Whitfield, one of the game's finest pass blockers, because they couldn't afford to lose him. Ex-Brown Gene Williams and center Roman Fortin were key off-season signees and secure the left side of the line. Lincoln Kennedy shifts to right tackle, but continues to battle his weight and a lack of intensity. Dave Richards figures to keep Kennedy in the doghouse and keep the right-tackle position; he started 12 games there last season. This remains an unstable spot. Right guard Mike Zandofsky ranks among the NFL's most penalized linemen. **Grade: D**

Despite a 4,000-yard season and leading the Falcons to the playoffs, Jeff George has always acted as if he wants out.



DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS Jessie Tuggle is one linebacker the Falcons can count on; he's led them in tackles for seven consecutive seasons and, entering his 10th year, figures to keep the streak alive. The rest of the picture remains somewhat fuzzy, considering the alterations. Cornelius Bennett, who has never produced double-digit sack numbers, was lured away from Buffalo by \$13.6 million, and the idea is to play him as a pass-rushing end opposite overpaid Chuck Smith. In nine seasons, Bennett has 52½ sacks. The tackles will be newcomers Shane Dronett (Denver) and Dan Owens (Detroit), while Ron George tries outside linebacker again. Clay Matthews might return for a 19th season, but no one's holding his breath. **Grade: D**

SECONDARY This group was out of position a lot last season, allowing 13 touchdown passes of 20 yards or more. Against the Rams, the Falcons were faced with having to stop Isaac Bruce, and they failed miserably. The broken leg suffered by cornerback Anthony Phillips with six games remaining killed cohesion. Phillips is expected back and will team with D.J. Johnson at corner. Patrick Bates, who walked out on the Raiders last season, seems excited about playing again, and if that's true, he'll be a big improvement over Kevin Ross at strong safety. Devin Bush is a super athlete who simply needs to think more before he reacts. Alton Montgomery, Brad Edwards and Darnell Walker supply solid depth. **Grade: C**

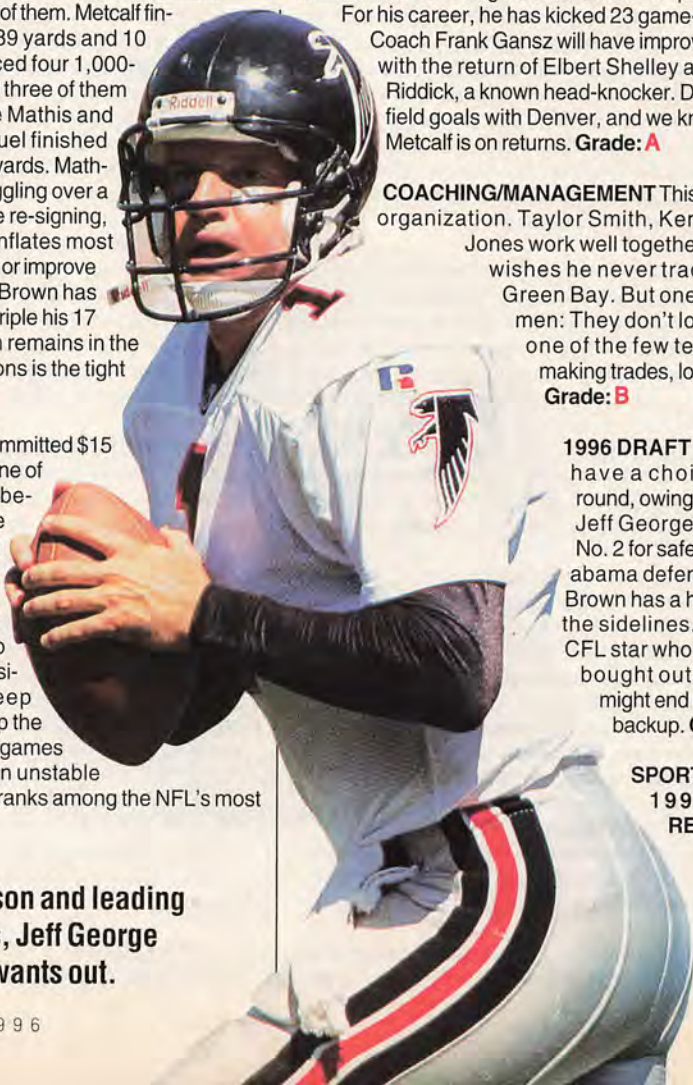
SPECIAL TEAMS At age 36, Morten Andersen shows no signs of slowing down. He has scored in a record 191 consecutive games. Andersen owned four of the six longest field goals last season while reaching the end zone on 67 percent of his kickoffs. For his career, he has kicked 23 game-winning field goals. Coach Frank Gansz will have improved coverage teams with the return of Elbert Shelley and ex-Brown Louis Riddick, a known head-knocker. Dronett blocked three field goals with Denver, and we know how dangerous Metcalf is on returns. **Grade: A**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT This has become a solid organization. Taylor Smith, Ken Herock and June Jones work well together, although Herock wishes he never traded Brett Favre to Green Bay. But one thing about these men: They don't look back. Atlanta is one of the few teams interested in making trades, looking to better itself. **Grade: B**

1996 DRAFT The Falcons didn't have a choice until the third round, owing the Colts a No. 1 for Jeff George and the Raiders a No. 2 for safety Patrick Bates. Alabama defensive end Shannon Brown has a history of staying on the sidelines. Juran Bolden is a CFL star who needs his contract bought out. Richard Huntley might end up being Ironhead's backup. **Grade: C**

**SPORT RATING: B-
1996 PREDICTED
RECORD: 9-7**

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ROB THINGAL JR./SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

Despite unprecedented expansion success, Collins and the Panthers are still a year away.

1996 OVERVIEW After starting 0-5, the Panthers won seven of their last 11 games, including a road win over the defending-champion 49ers, to prove they were a lot more than a mere expansion team. This season they open beautiful Carolinas Stadium—no more trucking down to Clemson—and this should be a considerable boost, as they'll finally have a sold-out home-field advantage. They appear to be only a year or two away from playoff contention.

QUARTERBACK The big question is why Kerry Collins didn't open as the starter last season. Collins was 7-6 in the role, the first winning record by a rookie quarterback since Dan Marino in 1983. Collins must improve his accuracy (49 percent last season) and control his turnovers: He had two four-interception games and six turnovers in a loss to New Orleans. But his overall decision-making was impressive, and he possesses the strength and toughness to hang in the pocket. Collins had two 300-yard games, and he throws a great deep ball. Bill Polian believes Collins can be another Jim Kelly. Steve Beuerlein opened as Carolina's starter, but he's a better performer in relief. His smarts should help Collins. Kelly Stouffer tries to rejuvenate his career in training camp. **Grade: C**

RUNNING BACKS Tshimanga "Tim" Biakabutuka will be the starting halfback as a rookie. Biakabutuka, who began playing football in Quebec after leaving his native Zaire, was a punishing inside runner at Michigan. He was timed in 4.45 seconds in the 40 and averaged almost six yards a carry in college. He has shifty moves and great balance. The Panthers weren't interested in resigning leading rusher Derrick Moore. Bob Christian is a solid blocker but not much of a runner. **Grade: C**

RECEIVERS Mark Carrier and Willie Green played better than expected last season. Carrier (66 for 1,002) had his best season since 1989, when he was in Tampa Bay, and a lot of that can be attributed to receivers coach Richard Williamson, formerly with the Bucs. Forty-five of Carrier's 66 receptions went for first

downs. Green's 18.8 average was the NFC's highest, and he had four 100-yard games and a team-high six touchdowns. Disappointed with Pete Metzelaars, Carolina signed Wesley Walls away from New Orleans. While platooning with Irv Smith, Walls caught 57 passes with the Saints, 37 more than Metzelaars. Collins can throw down the middle, where Walls particularly excels. Patrick Bates, the bronze medalist in the 200 meters at the 1992 Olympics, obviously will be the fastest reserve. **Grade: C**

OFFENSIVE LINE Jim McNally wants to pattern his line after the Cowboys, and ex-Raider right tackle Greg Skrepanak and Blake Brockmeyer will give him 300-pound bookend tackles. Brockmeyer as a rookie was sensational at left tackle. The line allowed nine sacks in the opener, then only 29 the remainder of the season. Mark Dennis leads the battle at right guard over Sean Love and Brandon Hayes, a McNally favorite. Curtis Whitley proved to be a great pickup in the expansion draft, while Frank Garcia didn't play like a rookie last season. **Grade: C**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS Coach Dom Capers tinkered so well with this group, alternating blitzing schemes while putting 37-year-old Sam Mills in position to make countless plays: five forced fumbles, four fumble recoveries and a career-high five interceptions. Mills will line up inside once again with Carlton Bailey. Lamar Lathon had a rough start for a \$13 million player but finished with eight sacks. Mike Fox had 28 quarterback pressures and led in every category among the linemen. Linebacker Kevin Greene, who had 35½ sacks in his three seasons in Pittsburgh, will provide a big boost to the pass rush. Neither Shawn King nor Gerald Williams possesses overpowering pass-rush skills. They are average players. **Grade: B-**

SECONDARY Last year's best defensive unit received a huge upgrade when 49ers cornerback Eric Davis signed on. Davis knows how to win and has developed into a big-play cornerback. He'll team with Tyrone Poole, one of last year's super rookies, in forming the division's best cornerback duo. Brett Maxie enjoyed his finest pro season. Maxie, who had serious knee operations in 1992 and '93, had played for Capers in New Orleans, and the 12-year veteran had six interceptions, 71 tackles and 20 passes defended. The perfect center fielder, Pat Terrell is another hard hitter at free safety. Bubba McDowell took a pay cut to stay this season, something cornerback Tim McKyer should consider. If McKyer does, he'll be the starting nickel back. **Grade: B**

SPECIAL TEAMS John Kasay scored 105 points, a career high, while missing only seven of 33 field goals. He nailed two game-winners. Punter Tommy Barnhardt finished in the middle of the pack in both gross and net averages, but has gone 306 kicks without a block. Dwight Stone is the best of an average group of return men. **Grade: C**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT General manager Bill Polian was voted Executive of the Year after the Panthers' amazing 7-9 season, the best ever by an NFL expansion club. Polian's personnel expertise paid

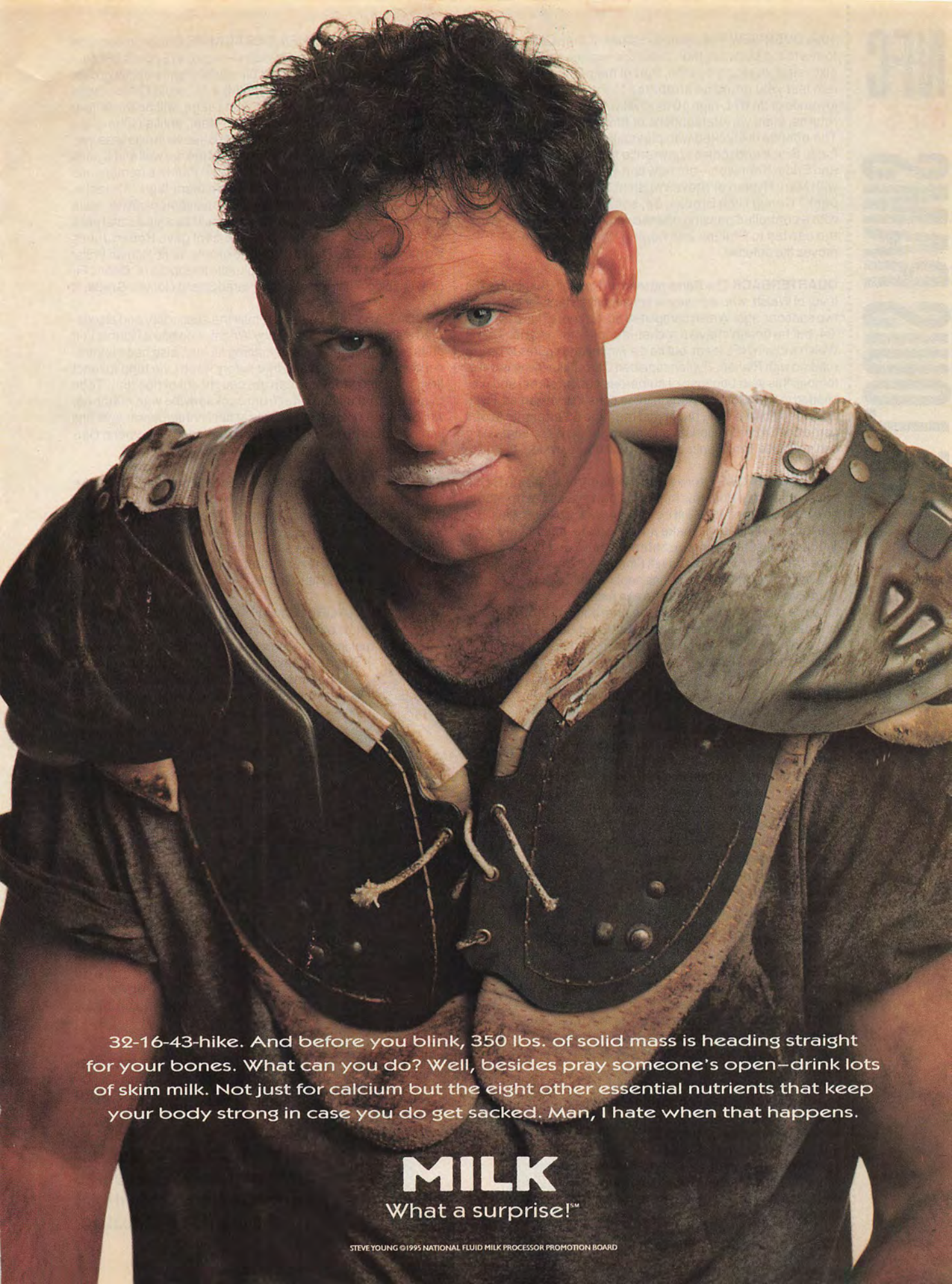
off, as all three first-round choices produced big-time, but Capers was the real surprise. He was better than anyone expected, convincing his players they had a chance while scheming some perfect game plans. Owner Jerry Richardson is quickly becoming an NFL powerbroker. **Grade: A**

1996 DRAFT A huge need will be filled if Biakabutuka becomes a franchise running back. Muhsin Muhammad is a physical receiver in the Michael Irvin mold, while Michigan State teammate Scott Green has all the intangibles you want in a fullback. Defensive tackle J.C. Price looks like the "Pillsbury Doughboy," said draftnik Joel Buchsbaum, but plays like a warrior. **Grade: A**

SPORT RATING: C

1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 7-9





32-16-43-hike. And before you blink, 350 lbs. of solid mass is heading straight for your bones. What can you do? Well, besides pray someone's open—drink lots of skim milk. Not just for calcium but the eight other essential nutrients that keep your body strong in case you do get sacked. Man, I hate when that happens.

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1996 OVERVIEW The change in scenery, from California to the Midwest, didn't alter the results—a sixth straight losing season. Part of the problem last year could be attributed to the allowance of an NFL-high 10 touchdowns via returns, eight via interceptions or fumbles. The offense is stacked with playmakers—Isaac Bruce and rookies Lawrence Phillips and Eddie Kennison—but how can they win with Mark Rypien or Steve Walsh at quarterback? Coach Rich Brooks, 54, seems stuck with a controlled passing offense while feeding the carries to Phillips and hoping Willie Shaw improves the defense.

QUARTERBACK The Rams passed on Randall Cunningham in favor of Walsh, who won seven consecutive starts for the Bears two seasons ago. Walsh completed 60 percent of his passes in '94, but he doesn't have a rocket-launcher for an arm. This is Walsh's fourth NFL team, but he's a winner and figures to be in a rotation with Rypien. Rypien replaced Chris Miller, who is out of football this year because of numerous concussions, and proceeded to throw for 300 yards in three consecutive games. Rypien doesn't move well, but he did manage 55 attempts in one game and 34 completions in another. It should be an interesting battle. Rookie Tony Banks is the third-stringer. **Grade: C**

RUNNING BACKS Brooks and the departed Jerome Bettis never got along, and now the Rams only have to worry about how sensitive their fans will be to Nebraska rookie Phillips' police record. Phillips will make an immediate impact, and a 1,000-yard season is guaranteed, based on his 4.4 speed and his 165 yards against Florida in the national championship game. Phillips has super cutting ability, a Jim Brown-like stiff arm, and he can make potential tacklers miss. With Phillips in the one-back, there isn't much need for great backups, but Greg Robinson and halfback/receiver Johnny Bailey are effective weapons. **Grade: B**

RECEIVERS Fans outside St. Louis now know who Isaac Bruce is. In his first full season, Bruce enjoyed the best year ever by a Ram and the second-greatest receiving season ever in the NFL with 1,781 yards on 119 catches, a 15-yard average. Bruce accomplished this without a great wideout partner, something LSU rookie Eddie Kennison might become. The Rams wanted to dump tight end Troy Drayton for Rickey Dudley but instead must hope that Drayton improves on last year's total of 47 catches, second only to Bruce. Alexander Wright still has game-breaking speed, while Todd Kinchen, a high-effort guy, is coming off April knee surgery. **Grade: B+**

OFFENSIVE LINE Brooks dumped coaching eccentric Dan "Mad Rad" Radakovich, but this group simply wasn't up to Rad's standards: It couldn't adjust or think on its feet. Left tackle Wayne Gandy and center Bern Brostek are the best players, but neither is dominating. Leo Goeas was a bust at left guard. St. Louis needs Zach Wiegert, a tough guy, to work his way into the lineup and force Dwayne White to lose 30 pounds. Darryl Ashmore won the right-tackle spot by default. Second-round pick Jesse James never lived up to second-round status. Co-line coaches Steve Greatwood and George Warhop have their hands full. **Grade: F**



DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS One big reason the Rams allowed a franchise-record 418 points last season was the horrible performance of this group. The Rams are hoping that Leslie O'Neal, who wasn't revered in San Diego, will be the leader Sean Gilbert wasn't. O'Neal, unlike Gilbert, is a pure pass rusher (105½ sacks in nine seasons). Kevin Carter played the run well and figures to improve. D'Marco Farr has tremendous strength and had a team-high 11½ sacks. Jimmie Jones is an average tackle, while Robert Young should be a situational pass rusher. Management gave Robert Jones

big money to leave Dallas to play the middle, while Roman Phifer ranks among the NFL's best weak-side linebackers. Cedric Figaro is a bigger hitter than often-injured Shane Conlan. **Grade: B**

SECONDARY St. Louis has rebuilt the secondary and discovered a star in strong safety Toby Wright, who has a Ronnie Lott attitude. Wright, the second-leading tackler, also had six interceptions. Both Wright and free safety Keith Lyle tend to react first, read second. They can get caught out of position. Todd Lyght's \$10.5 million offer from Jacksonville was matched, while Anthony Parker is a liability at right cornerback. Lyght has improved, but he doesn't rank in anyone's top 10 corners. Gerald McBurrows has some ability. **Grade: C**

SPECIAL TEAMS Punter Sean Landeta led the NFC for the second consecutive season with a 44.3 average. Landeta and Dean Biasucci are reliable veterans. The Rams wasted a third-round choice on Steve McLaughlin last year. Kennison might have the same kind of positive impact on punt and kick returns that Tamarick Vanover did for Kansas City. **Grade: B**

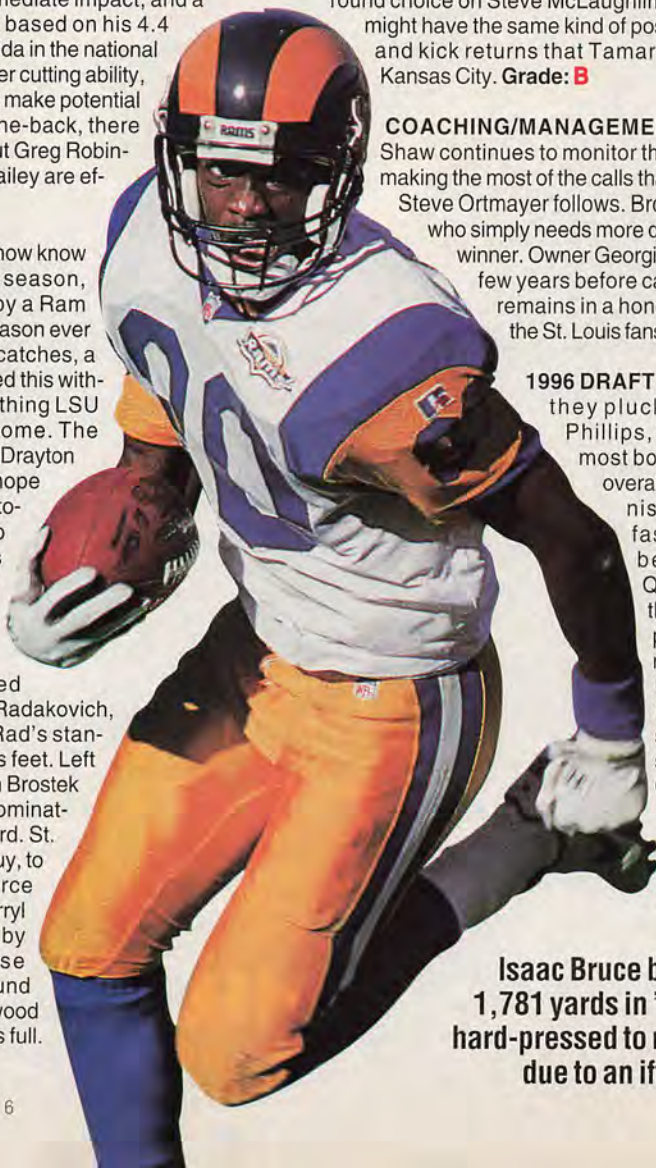
COACHING/MANAGEMENT President John Shaw continues to monitor the overall operation, making the most of the calls that personnel director Steve Ortmyer follows. Brooks is a solid coach who simply needs more quality players to be a winner. Owner Georgia Frontiere will wait a few years before cashing out. The club remains in a honeymoon period with the St. Louis fans. **Grade: B**

1996 DRAFT Super, considering they plucked running back Phillips, the best player on most boards, with the sixth overall choice. LSU's Kennison was the draft's fastest receiver and best kick returner. Quarterback Banks throws a better deep pass than Walsh right now, and Washington tight end Ernie Conwell will snap and probably start at H-back. **Grade: A**

SPORT RATING:

C
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 7-9

Isaac Bruce busted loose for 1,781 yards in '95, but he'll be hard-pressed to match that total due to an iffy QB situation.



MIKEY PLEIGER

1996 OVERVIEW The Saints moved into a new \$10 million practice facility around draft time, and maybe the new surroundings will make them feel special because their record won't. The Saints have become an average team thanks to their lines and their lack of a superstar with which to scare opponents. Also, Jim Mora might be coaching in his last season, and that's never good for a sliding franchise.

QUARTERBACK Jim Everett's games-played streak with the Saints, now at 32, will continue. His 107.2 quarterback rating in the fourth quarter was the best among NFL starters last season. Last year, Everett broke Archie Manning's club record with 26 TD passes while finishing 30 yards short of 4,000. The change of scenery has improved Everett's psyche, but he still feels the pressure and occasionally will surrender the ball foolishly. Everett, 33, can't afford to get injured because Doug Nussmeier hasn't played a down in two years. **Grade: C**

RUNNING BACKS The Saints' running game has been erratic, although Mario Bates followed his rookie season with a solid 951 yards and seven touchdowns. Fullback Ray Zellers was slowed by injuries but figures to be more of a factor in goal-line situations. Lorenzo Neal is the power broker in short yardage, while Derek Brown is a reliable backup. **Grade: C**

RECEIVERS Gone are Quinn Early and tight end Wesley Walls, who combined for 138 receptions, 1,781 yards and 12 touchdowns, 47 percent of the passing offense. Everett criticized the losses in the off-season. Mike Haynes and Torrance Small, the returning starters, made 79 catches last year, two fewer than Early. Haynes, a burner, is underused because coordinator Carl Smith doesn't like to throw long. His average per catch slipped to 14.6 last season. The club believes Lee DeRamus has Terry Glenn ability. The onus to improve is on Irv Smith, the remaining tight end. Smith must add 20 catches to last year's total of 45 for the Saints to have any chance. **Grade: C**

OFFENSIVE LINE This group has tailed off the last several years. High-priced center Jeff Uhlenhake has been hampered by bad knees, meaning Craig Novitsky could end up starting. Willie Roaf took too many plays off last season but remains a technically superior left tackle. Jim Dombroski has played every snap the past two seasons at left guard. Andy McCollum and Ed King could rotate at right guard because neither can dominate. Long-time starter Chris Port was forced to retire because of a neck injury. The Saints were weakened at right tackle, where ex-Ram Clarence Jones replaces the departed Richard Cooper, who was a better drive blocker. **Grade: D**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS Times have changed so dramatically that this unit finished in the bottom third last year. The bright spot has been the awesome play of tackle Wayne Martin. In the last four seasons, Martin has 43.5 sacks, sixth-best among NFL linemen. Newcomers Darren Mickel (Chiefs) and Fred Stokes (Rams) upgrade the outside rush. The acquisitions shift fiesty Joe Johnson into the John Randle role in Monte Kiffin's four-man scheme. Mora needs Renaldo Turnbull and Rufus Porter to collect 12 sacks somehow and for Mark Fields to start playing like the first-round choice he was a year ago. Brian Jones and Richard Harvey have speed, but they remind no one of the linebackers this franchise once had. **Grade: D**

SECONDARY The starters managed only five interceptions last season, so the Saints used their first-round pick on a defensive back—Oregon's Alex Molden—for the first time. Molden is an excellent bump-and-run defender who had six interceptions in the pass-happy Pac 10. The plan is to start him in the slot, where he can play man coverage as the nickel

back. Sean Lumpkin and Vince Buck, who missed three games last season with a broken leg, are two slow-footed safeties. Their lack of speed places a lot of pressure on two ex-Eagles cornerbacks: newcomer Mark McMillian and second-year Saint Eric Allen. After a slow start, Allen came on strong. Opponents figure to focus on the 5-7 McMillian, who plays hard but is limited physically. **Grade: C**

SPECIAL TEAMS Losing Morten Andersen proved more damaging than the Saints ever envisioned. Chip Lohmiller and Doug Brien combined to miss 13 field goals, so John Becksvoort, Tennessee's all-time leading scorer who sat out 1995, will try kicking. Klaus Wilmsmeyer was the 25th-ranked punter with a 40.6 net average. Tyrone Hughes, second only to Washington's Brian Mitchell as a game-breaker, failed to score but did manage 1,879 combined return yardage, a club record. **Grade: D**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT Owner Tom Benson courted Jimmy Johnson, only to wind up retaining Mora (91-68 in 10 years) but reducing his control by elevating personnel man Billy Kuharich to general manager. The division of power means blame will be specific rather than shared. Kuharich, a fine scout, may be overmatched. **Grade: C**

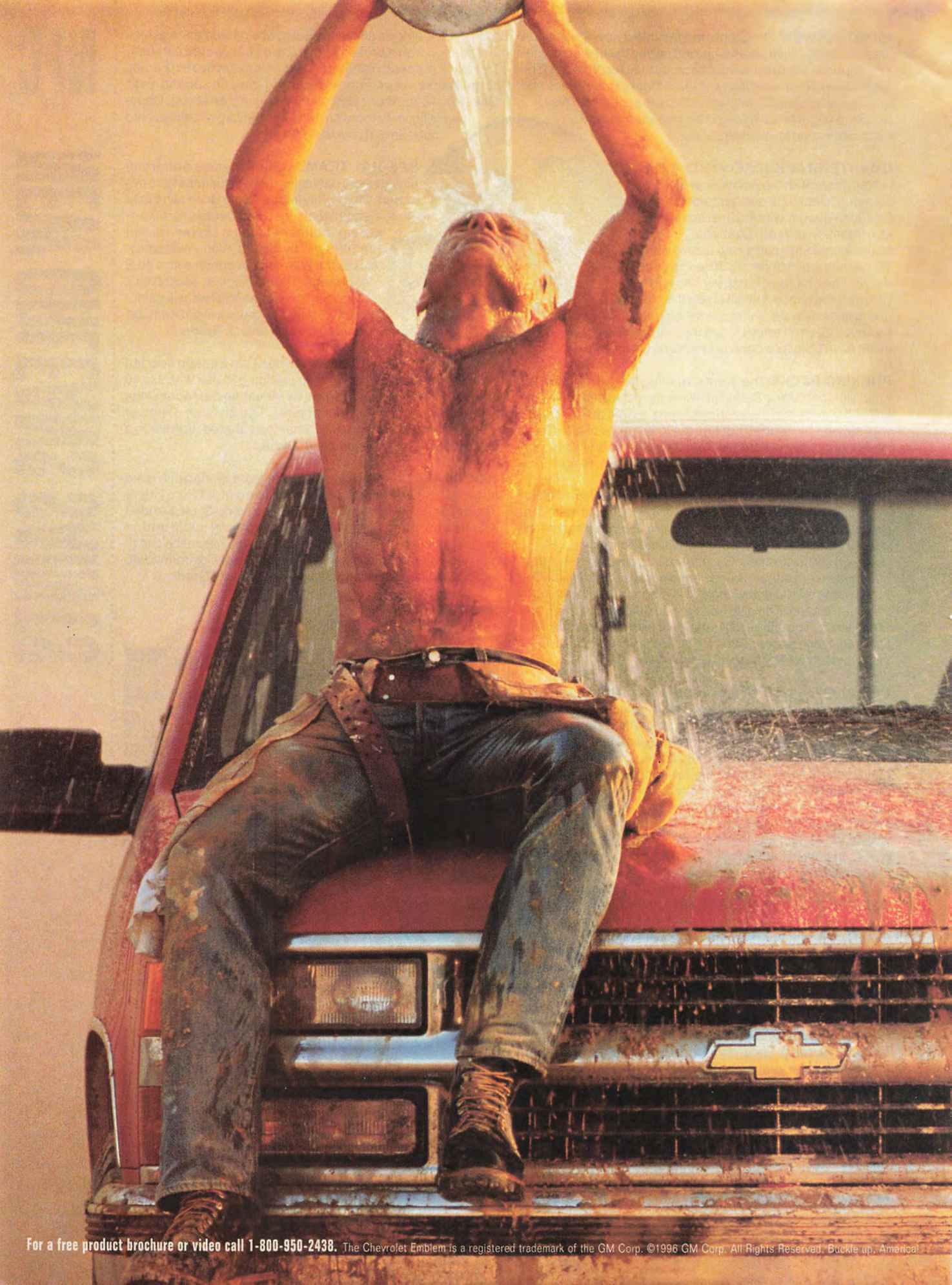
1996 DRAFT Cornerback was a need considering this team allowed 233 yards passing a game and must face Steve Young, Jeff George and Kerry Collins twice each. Molden was the top-rated corner, and Je'Rod Cherry could end up starting at safety. Michigan's Mercury Hayes has made clutch catches in meaningful games. Brady Smith of Colorado State led Division I players with 16 sacks last season. **Grade: B**

SPORT RATING: D

1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 6-10



Willie Roaf can protect the quarterback, but he can't play defense, the Saints' Achilles' heel.



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OVERVIEW Thanks to defensive coordinator Wade Phillips, the Bills produced another star last season in linebacker Bryce Paup. Despite some defections, Buffalo remains a star-studded club under Marv Levy (138-103 lifetime), and another 10-win season is highly probable. Quarterback Jim Kelly's durability is the lone concern. The secondary, which was decimated last season, could develop into the NFL's best, which should mean high sack totals again for Paup, Bruce Smith and Co. Buffalo still has the talent for another playoff rush.

QUARTERBACK Kelly, now 36, is coming off his eighth 3,000-yard season, and counting his two USFL campaigns has thrown for 42,499 professional yards. Kelly played smartly last season, throwing only 13 interceptions and keeping his team in virtually every game. And he played the entire season with a bum throwing shoulder. Kelly's physical limitations no longer allow him to be considered among the NFL's elite. He still has the ability to take Buffalo to the playoffs, where he has a 9-7 record with 27 interceptions and 20 touchdowns. Buffalo doesn't have a definite quarterback of the future on the roster. Alex Van Pelt has more ability than high draft choice Todd Collins. **Grade: B**

RUNNING BACKS His overall numbers continue to decline, but Thurman Thomas managed another 1,000-yard campaign last season, joining Eric Dickerson and Barry Sanders as the only runners with seven straight such seasons. Thomas shook off leg injuries to post two 100-yard games against Miami, and a new contract guarantees his final games will be in Rich Stadium. Carwell Gardner provides the blocking punch, and Darick Holmes, spelling Thomas, managed 1,711 combined yards, the best by a Buffalo rookie since Joe Cribbs. Holmes, a seventh-rounder, simply needs to quit fumbling. **Grade: B**

RECEIVERS This group could undergo a significant transformation, with Bill Brooks, who had a club-record 11 touchdown catches last season, perhaps going elsewhere. Ex-Saint Quinn Early, 31, a perfectionist as a route runner and someone capable of 80 receptions, joins mainstay Andre Reed in providing Kelly with another dependable target. Tight end Lonnie Johnson dropped too many, but still finished with 49 receptions and should make fans forget about Pete Metzelaars this season. Russell Copeland and Steve Tasker, who produced in the clutch, add depth. **Grade: B**

OFFENSIVE LINE This line doesn't compare with those in the early '90s, but it blocked well enough to help lead the Bills to the NFL's sixth-best rushing offense and permitted nine fewer sacks than in '94. John Fina has blossomed into a franchise left tackle, and his best years remain ahead of him. Center Kent Hull, 35, continues to hold this unit together while tutoring left guard Rueben Brown, who started every game as a rookie. Brown can help muscle the pass rushers that swim inside Fina. **Grade: B**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS

Cornelius Bennett is gone, but this group will continue to be a quarterback's nightmare after leading the NFL with 49 sacks in '95. Bruce Smith, who had off-season knee arthroscopy, earned his eighth Pro Bowl visit by registering 10½ sacks and 36 quarterback pressures, plus that huge knockout of Boomer Esiason. Phil Hansen developed at left end, collecting 10 sacks and 110 tackles. Hansen and new nose tackle Ted Washington effectively stuffed the run, while ex-Cowboy Jim Jeffcoat proved worth a million on passing



downs, adding 26 pressures. With Bennett gone, the linebacking will be more basic. Ex-Lion Chris Spielman has lost his speed but remains tough in tight quarters. **Grade: A**

SECONDARY A great pass rush camouflaged the many injuries to this group last season: A total of 27 starts were lost by the four regulars. Safety Henry Jones and cornerback Jeff Burris were the main casualties, missing the stretch run with knee injuries. Free safety Kurt Schultz proceeded to hold the backups together,

leading with six interceptions and 90 tackles. With everyone back, Buffalo has the division's best secondary. Thomas Smith is a smart, physical player at right cornerback, and Jones has Pro Bowl ability. Unexpected playing time gave youngsters like Ken Irvin, Marlon Kerner and Filmel Johnson the chance to prove themselves in the NFL. **Grade: A**

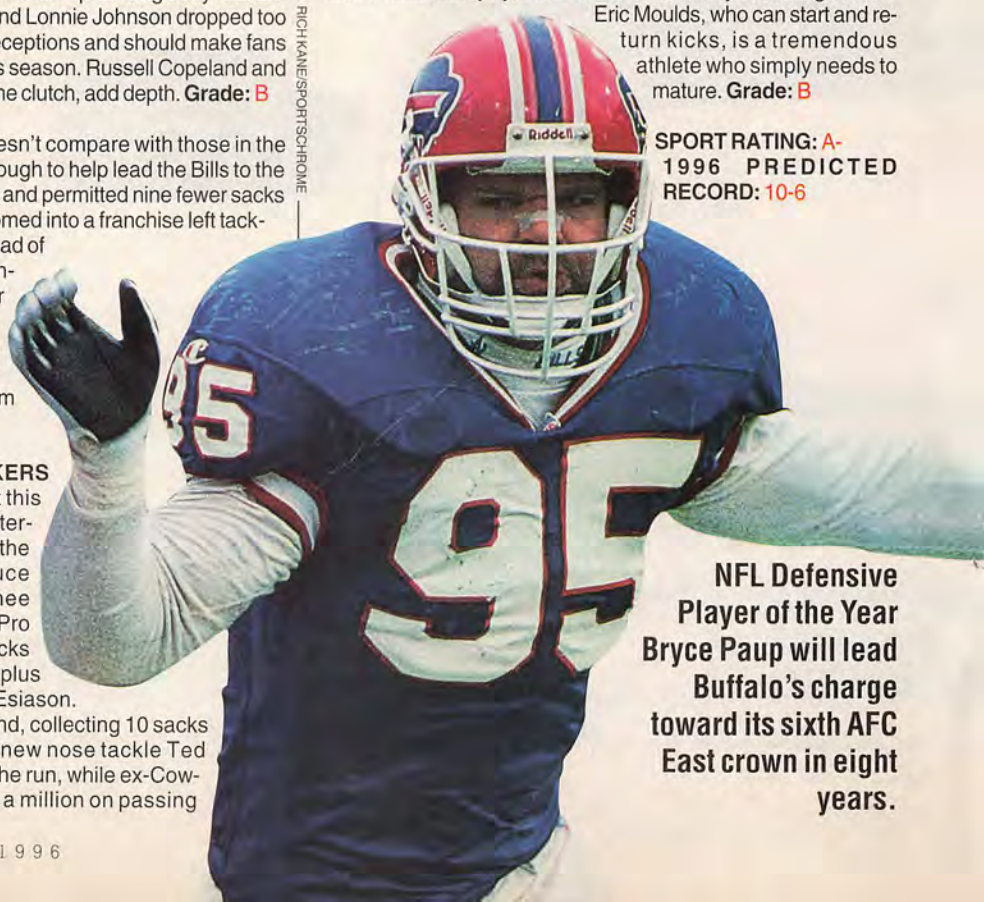
SPECIAL TEAMS Steve Tasker left his main job of hunting down return specialists to bail out the receiving corps and also returned punts when Jeff Burris was injured. This season, Tasker should return to his normal head-hunting duty, where the punt- and kick-coverage units ranked 19th overall. Chris Mohr, a proven bad-weather punter, is coming off a career-low 36.2 net average, but he did place 21 punts inside the 20-yard line and hasn't had one blocked in 341 boots. Steve Christie collected a \$1.5 million signing bonus after missing three kicks inside 40 yards for the first time in three seasons. **Grade: B**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT General manager John Butler, who loves to scout, has ably filled the shoes of Bill Polian, and owner Ralph Wilson continues his strong support of his football men. Coach Marv Levy and staff have security and the chance to keep the winning tradition alive. Except for those wintry blasts, this is a good place to work and play. **Grade: A**

1996 DRAFT Matt Stevens of Appalachian State has recovered from ACL surgery and was considered the second-best cornerback before the injury; the Bills have the luxury of waiting on him.

Eric Moulds, who can start and return kicks, is a tremendous athlete who simply needs to mature. **Grade: B**

SPORT RATING: A-
1996 PREDICTED
RECORD: 10-6



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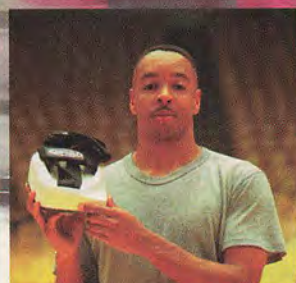
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Tight end Ben Coates should see more daylight this season with an upgraded receiving corps.

OVERVIEW This could be the final season for Bill Parcells, who returned to NFL coaching for the wrong reason: money. The big bucks have clashed with a basic Parcells belief: run the ball, work the clock and allow your defense to keep your team in contention. Well, the Patriots had the NFL's third-worst defense last season—a Parcells team had never ranked so low—and their scoring efficiency was the NFL's fifth worst (32 TDs in 208 possessions).

QUARTERBACK Drew Bledsoe decided against having surgery on his separated left shoulder last season, and he figures to be heaving rockets again. Chris Palmer, who did wonders with Doug Flutie in the USFL, will be the coach monitoring Bledsoe's uneven mechanics. Bledsoe damaged the shoulder in Week 3 and was never the same, and the passing offense nosedived from No. 1 in 1994 to No. 12 in '95. Bledsoe must be more patient in the pocket because his overall performance remains suspect: five more interceptions than touchdowns thrown in '95. Scott Zolak is a backup who can win games. **Grade: B**

RUNNING BACKS Curtis Martin will be hard-pressed for an encore. As a rookie, Martin slashed his way to 1,748 total yards, fifth best in the NFL. In the process, he broke Jim Nance's club record, which had stood since 1966, and led the AFC in rushing. Martin must remain productive (15 touchdowns last season) for the Patriots to reach the playoffs. Dave Meggett, a better cutter on turf than grass, would have been a bust but for his work on return duties. Consequently, Parcells doesn't have a backup to Martin. Sam Gash is merely an average blocking fullback. **Grade: A**

RECEIVERS Parcells admitted he made personnel blunders in this area last season and hopes ex-Charger Shawn Jefferson and No. 1 pick Terry Glenn will be the speed targets Bledsoe lacked a year ago. Glenn needs to get stronger, but he can separate from any defender and reminds many of Joey Galloway. Tight end Ben Coates remains the go-to receiver, but he was

hampered with a severe ankle sprain and played on guts much of last season. Vincent Brisby (15 yards a reception) has a great future but needs Jefferson to bust loose. Kevin Lee and Will Moore are youngsters with considerable promise. Together, this group had 76 drops last season, a total it can't afford to duplicate. **Grade: B-**

OFFENSIVE LINE This group solidified by the end of the season, helping to spring Martin for 11 runs of 20 yards or better. Jeff Dellenbach lost his job to rookie center Dave Wohlabaugh, who was a monster on the run and adequate as a pass blocker. Left tackle Bruce Armstrong is coming off his finest season, while Bob Kratch and Max Lane teamed well on the right side. There are no guarantees that Pat Harlow will settle for playing left guard, meaning old-timer William Roberts could end up there. Todd Rucci is an adequate reserve. **Grade: C**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS The biggest change has ex-Browns coach Bill Belichick switching the Pats to a four-man front. Chris Slade is the pivotal piece in this puzzle. The defensive MVP last season, Slade will be freed up like Bryce Paup was in Buffalo. He'll be the fifth rusher coming on passing downs. Outside linebacker Willie McGinest (11 sacks in '95) will move from linebacker to left end, while two free agents, Mark Wheeler and Pio Sagapolutele, are the new tackles. Troy Barnett figures to battle Mike Jones at right end. Bad knees finally sidelined linebacker Vincent Brown, who led the Pats in tackles for four straight seasons. Monty Brown, last year with Buffalo, will take his place. Ted Johnson has huge shoes to fill at middle linebacker because Brown was an inspirational leader. **Grade: C**

SECONDARY Belichick will concentrate on this unit, which opens the season without Maurice Hurst and Myron Guyton. Ex-Lion Willie Clay, who was given \$6 million to be the free safety, has big-play skills. Last season he returned six interceptions 20 yards or more. Rickey Reynolds is paired with youngster Ty Law at cornerback. Both are aggressive, physical players, with Law better against the run. Terry Ray is a heavy hitter at strong safety. Jimmy Hitchcock and Corwin Brown are adequate reserves. **Grade: C**

SPECIAL TEAMS Belichick brought Tom Tupa with him from Cleveland, and Tupa, an ex-quarterback, has a knack for two-point conversions when he isn't punting. Kicker Matt Bahr has been active since 1979, and his future is cloudy. He missed three field goals of under 40 yards in one game, although he has converted 66 straight extra points. Dave Meggett is a solid kick returner. He averaged 25.4 yards on kicks and 8.5 on punts. The kickoff average was the NFL's sixth best. **Grade: B**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT Owner Bob Kraft has become more influential, wanting to be apprised of every move. There has been some frustration within the executive branch that Bledsoe has collected \$20 million thus far and produced nothing more than one playoff loss. Bledsoe is close to becoming a major whiner. Belichick is the head coach-in-waiting, while Chris Palmer will have more influence over the offensive game plan. **Grade: B**

1996 DRAFT Bobby Grier, not Parcells, controlled the draft and wanted Glenn, who will either start or open as the slot receiver. Glenn averaged 23 yards a catch at Ohio State. Chris Sullivan and Christian Peter have that tough-guy attitude, and one figures to stick on the defensive

line. Heath Irwin, nephew of golfer Hale Irwin, has the stamina to be a solid guard. Washington's Lawyer Milloy is a heavy-hitting safety who might crack the lineup. **Grade: B**

SPORT RATING: B
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 9-7





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OVERVIEW The pressure is on Jimmy Johnson, and he applied most of it himself by predicting that the Dolphins will win this season. Johnson was brash enough to say he wants the Super Bowl ring for himself, not for record-setting quarterback Dan Marino. The Dolphins became soft under Don Shula (347 career victories), and three of their best players left via free agency. Unlike with the Cowboys, Johnson doesn't have a roomful of talent, nor the draft choices, to rebuild this franchise as quickly as he did in Big D.

QUARTERBACK Marino, who will be 35 in September, has lost something off his fastball, but his poise and smarts keep him among the game's finest quarterbacks. Marino demanded more discipline than Shula provided, and Johnson should fulfill the quarterback's needs. Marino has thrown for at least one touchdown in every one of his playoff games. He holds NFL records with 6,531 attempts, 3,913 completions, 48,841 yards and 352 touchdowns. Marino will have more flexibility with play selection this season because Johnson will lean on coach Gary Stevens. **Grade: A**

RUNNING BACKS There are a lot of bodies in the backfield, but no Emmitt Smith, the kind of runner Johnson needs. Bernie Parmalee carried the load (878 yards, nine touchdowns) last season, but Terry Kirby and Keith Byars are better receivers. Johnson wants to dump this running-back-by-committee plan, and it might be possible if UCLA rookie Karim Abdul-Jabbar develops in training camp. Byars took a salary reduction from \$1.5 million to \$300,000 to remain a Dolphin. Parmalee had a partially torn ACL repaired in January. Irving Spikes has shown flashes of being a quality third-down back. **Grade: C-**

RECEIVERS Eric Green disappointed last season (43 receptions for 499 yards and three TDs), but the huge tight end had an excuse: a bad left knee, which was scoped in the off-season. Gone is Irving Fryar, replaced by speedster Fred Barnett, whose production dropped in Philadelphia's 49ers-like offense. His 48 receptions were 21 below his pro average, and unlike Rodney Peete, Marino can get him the ball deep. O.J. McDuffie will cross the middle and is capable of being a 1,300-yard receiver. Charles Jordan got \$2.6 million, and the acrobatic youngster will be given every opportunity to be the No. 3 wideout. **Grade: B**

OFFENSIVE LINE Coach Larry Beightol is a screamer and taskmaster of legendary proportions. The new line coach's first order of business will be to return Keith Sims and Richmond Webb to Pro Bowl form. A prototypical Beightol player is 34-year-old tackle Ron Heller, who returns following minor surgery on both knees. Heller is a fighter. James Brown, a Beightol favorite with the Jets, was acquired in a trade and will eventually push Heller aside. Tim Ruddy impressed everyone with his play



at center, while Chris Gray and Andrew Greene will battle at right guard. **Grade: B**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS This unit's two best players, linebacker Bryan Cox and end Marco Coleman, have signed elsewhere, forcing Johnson to draft Baylor's underachieving Daryl Gardener in the first round. Johnson will have to motivate him. Tim Bowens is a run enforcer who must improve his pass-rush skills. Danny Stubbs took less money to play for Johnson and come home. He's a pass-rush specialist. Jeff Cross is coming

off a disappointing season, recording just 54 tackles and six sacks after signing a huge contract. Trace Armstrong played with a bad ankle, knee and wrist last season but always gave exemplary effort. Dwight Hollier will move to the middle, where Cox led the club in tackles for four consecutive seasons. Hollier might be quicker than Cox and a tad tamer with his outbursts. Johnson plans to insert speedy Aubrey Beavers into a weak-side role. **Grade: D**

SECONDARY Troy Vincent, Miami's best cornerback, signed with Philadelphia. Vincent mugged receivers and led the club with five interceptions. J.B. Brown, the remaining corner, had two picks. The plan is to rotate Robert Bailey and Terrell Buckley opposite Brown, who has been injury-prone but has solid coverage skills. The disaster is at safety, where starters Louis Oliver and Gene Atkins feuded last season. Atkins was a locker-room time bomb. Oliver, when his head is right, can rank among the game's biggest hitters. **Grade: D**

SPECIAL TEAMS It is critical that Miami keep game-breaker McDuffie on kick returns while his offensive role expands. Miami was above average in this area last season. The player who needs to worry is kicker Pete Stoyanovich because Johnson doesn't tolerate poor performances in this area. Stoyanovich has a big contract, but he hasn't been that consistent. Joe Nedney will shadow Stoyanovich in training camp. John Kidd helped the coverage teams because he's a fine directional punter. If McDuffie can handle all his duties and still return kicks, the Dolphins should be fine. **Grade: B**

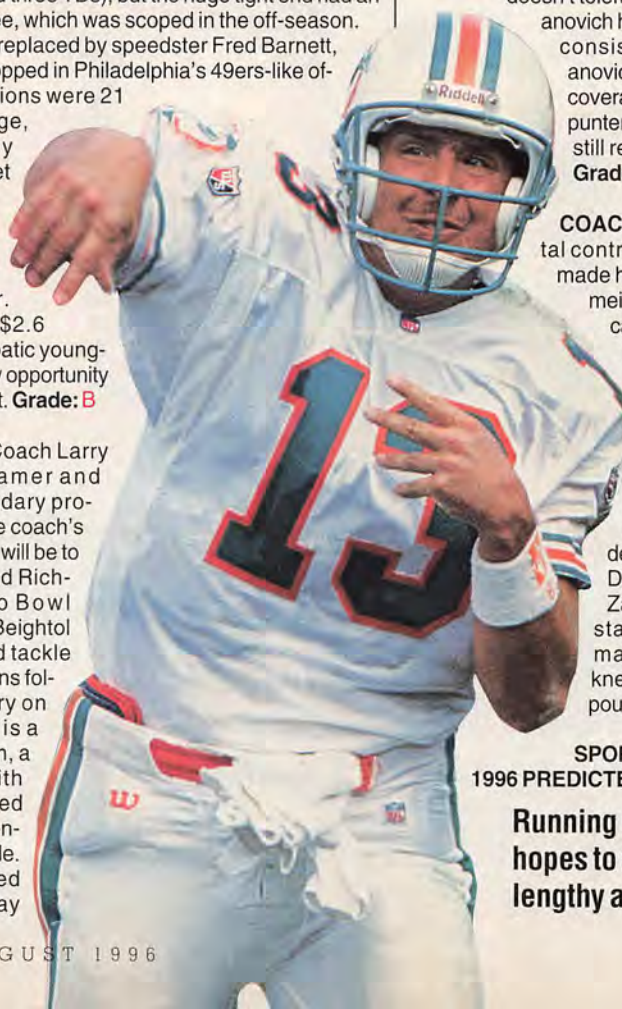
COACHING/MANAGEMENT Johnson has total control, although owner Wayne Huizenga made him retain Eddie Jones and Bryan Wiedmeier, who placed this club in such a salary-cap mess. Johnson (51-37, including playoffs) doesn't want to coach too long. He'd prefer to win the Super Bowl this year and retire to the front office. Rest assured that Johnson won't coach more than three years. **Grade: A**

1996 DRAFT Seven of Johnson's 12 picks were on defense, where Daryl Gardener must learn to play all-out all the time. Dorian Brew is a cover cornerback, while Zach Thomas should be a special-teams star. Abdul-Jabbar was plagued by too many fumbles and operations on both knees. Fullback Stanley Pritchett is a 240-pounder who can catch and block. **Grade: B**

SPORT RATING: B

1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 9-7

Running out of time, Dan Marino hopes to add a Super Bowl title to his lengthy and impressive resumé.



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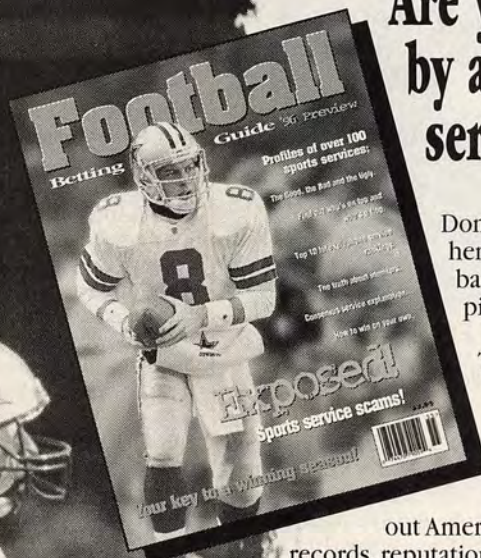
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BRIAN SHULOCK

Despite a healthy Marshall Faulk, Cinderella's slipper no longer fits in Indy. Reality bites.

OVERVIEW The Colts might have been one Hail Mary reception away from the Super Bowl last season, but there's enough turmoil to derail all the progress that Bill Tobin has developed. Many of the Colts can't stand Marshall Faulk, and a dozen more are skeptical of coach Ted Marchibroda's firing. This will put added pressure on new coach Lindy Infante, who has always excelled at offensive game plans more so than halftime speeches. The defense is led by linebacker Quentin Coryatt, who has a huge contract and some legal problems to overcome. This division is top heavy with fine head coaches, and Infante doesn't rank with Johnson, Parcells and Levy.

QUARTERBACK Captain Comeback, Jim Harbaugh, displaced Steve Young as the NFL's top-rated quarterback last season, the only passer with a rating above 100.0. Harbaugh completed almost 64 percent of his attempts and threw 17 touchdowns with only five interceptions. Harbaugh proved Mike Ditka wrong by developing into a spectacular touch passer who was patient in the pocket. He engineered three fourth-quarter comebacks, and now he must duplicate those feats after becoming a \$4 million quarterback. Paul Justin, who has tons of ability, figures to be Harbaugh's backup. **Grade: A**

RUNNING BACKS Teammates questioned Faulk's pain tolerance last December, but he remained a thing of beauty on the field. Faulk rushed for 1,078 yards and 11 touchdowns. The shocker was that while Faulk was having cartilage removed from his knee and fullback Roosevelt Potts was hurting, the Colts discovered that their reserves were truly gifted. Lamont Warren and Zack Crockett were awesome in the playoffs. Warren rushed for 134 yards and had another 100 yards in receptions during the playoffs. Crockett had touchdowns of 66 and 33 yards against San Diego. Crockett will be Faulk's running mate this year. **Grade: A**

RECEIVERS Harbaugh looked short and discovered friendly targets in his running backs and rookie tight end Ken Dilger, a faster version of Jay Novacek. With Willie "Flipper" Anderson expected

to return from knee surgery, the wideout corps is very deep. The group's production dipped to 46 percent of all receptions. Both Sean Dawkins and Dilger averaged better than 15 yards a catch last season, while Floyd Turner and Aaron Bailey combined for 56 receptions. **Grade: B**

OFFENSIVE LINE When attempting to fill a personnel void, general manager Tobin has looked toward his former Bears draft choices—seven total. After Will Wolford, who missed only four snaps in two seasons, signed with Pittsburgh, Tobin signed Troy Auzenne to play left tackle. If Kirk Lowdermilk doesn't return, ex-Bear Jay Leeuwenburg will open at center. Otherwise, Leeuwenburg could be a factor at guard, where Randy Dixon is coming off an awful year and Eric Mahlum is trying to overcome a bad knee. Joe Staysniak has good feet and pulls well, but he can be overpowered. **Grade: D**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS The main reason the Colts finished tied for seventh in overall defense was the front four. Tony Siragusa became the spiritual leader, and his toughness rubbed off on Bernard Whittington, Tony McCoy and Tony Bennett. Bennett continued to make strides as a linebacker playing as a down lineman, leading the club with 10½ sacks. Siragusa plugged the middle, forcing teams wide. Jim Johnson, who replaces Tobin as defensive coordinator, is excited about perhaps the most athletic group of linebackers in the AFC. A strong-side pursuer, Quentin Coryatt is coming off his best season, although Jeff Herrod edged him as the club's leading tackler. Both have the speed and quickness to break up blocking schemes and chase down runners. If Trev Alberts, who struggled as a down lineman, can open as the weak-side linebacker, the Colts will have an awesome trio. **Grade: B**

SECONDARY This aggressive group found its niche in 1994, and its success carried over to last season, although interceptions dropped from 18 to 13. Ray Buchanan gambled too much at left cornerback. When he's patient, he can cover anyone in this division. Eugene Daniel turns 35 this year and tends to read quarterbacks' eyes too often. Daniel would be a perfect nickel back, especially if Ray McElroy or Damon Watts steps up. Free safety Jason Belser is a man possessed, allowing David Tate to roam and pick his spots. **Grade: C**



SPECIAL TEAMS Cary Blanchard developed into a clutch kicker after Mike Cofer was dumped. His overtime field goal beat Miami, and he nailed four field goals to upset San Francisco. He converted his first nine attempts and finished the season with only five misses. Chris Gardocki handled the punting and kickoff duties and was average in both categories; 10.7 percent of kickoffs were touchbacks. The coverage teams ranked in the bottom third of the league. **Grade: B**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT Tobin and Jimmy Irsay have settled power struggles, and Irsay has resolved his personal connections to the team following owner Bob Irsay's stroke. Infante won't battle Tobin on personnel decisions, and the offense should prosper under his leadership. But the Colts won last year because they had three head coaches, and two of them, Marchibroda and Vince Tobin, are now elsewhere. **Grade: B**

1996 DRAFT ESPN's Sterling Sharpe kept insisting that Syracuse's Marvin Harrison was the draft's best receiver. If he doesn't crack the lineup, he'll definitely return kicks. Houston cornerback Dedric Mathis doesn't like tackling, but he can bump-and-run. Brian Milne is a short-yardage blocker, while Nittany Lions teammate Keith Conlin needs to bulk up his 6-6 frame to be an NFL offensive tackle. **Grade: C**

SPORT RATING: C

1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 7-9

OVERVIEW Rich Kotite has done a lot of smart things. The Jets had the NFL's worst offense last season, averaging only 14.6 points and 254 yards per game. They won't this season after signing quarterback Neil O'Donnell, receiver Jeff Graham and two starting tackles in Jumbo Elliott and David Williams. No one is sure Kotite is the right coach for this upswing, though he hired Ron Erhardt, late of the Steelers, to direct the offense.



QUARTERBACK O'Donnell, whose errant throws cost Pittsburgh a Super Bowl, was rewarded by Kotite with \$25 million, making him the fourth-highest paid quarterback in the league. What O'Donnell (39-22 as Steelers starter) does best is protect the football; only Troy Aikman and Jim Harbaugh had lower interception rates than O'Donnell. O'Donnell knows how to use a running game and throw to the tight end, a prerequisite in any Erhardt-designed offense. Frank Reich seems secure as the backup. **Grade: B**

RUNNING BACKS Erhardt can win with undersized runners. Remember Joe Morris with the Giants? Adrian Murrell, who has signed a new four-year contract, fits that mold and was the featured back last season, rushing for 795 yards. However, Murrell managed only one touchdown on 192 carries. He'll do better with a much-feared passing game. Brad Baxter and Ron Moore are journeymen backs who are dependable but hardly flashy. **Grade: D**

RECEIVERS Jeff Graham, a favorite target of O'Donnell's in Pittsburgh, is reunited with his former quarterback after catching 82 passes for 1,301 yards last season in Chicago. But Graham might not be the go-to guy because of Keyshawn Johnson, the first receiver taken No. 1 since Irving Fryar in 1984. At 6-3, 220, Johnson's a physical receiver with game-breaking speed. Second-year performer Wayne Chrebet was a pleasant surprise. Chrebet caught one fewer pass than Seattle's sensational rookie Joey Galloway last season. Rico Smith, who has speed, arrives from Cleveland. Kyle Brady, last year's first-round pick, figures to be the starting tight end. **Grade: B**

OFFENSIVE LINE The Jets suffered through nine different starting lineups last season, and this unit ranked among the NFL's worst, allowing 47 sacks. The team did some serious upgrading, stealing left tackle Jumbo Elliott from the Giants and signing David Williams, a cap-related release by Houston, at right tackle. Elliott, 31, is a huge gamble because of chronic back problems. These acquisitions suddenly give the Jets a chance because both men are great pass blockers. Talented big man Siupeli Malamala will slide down from tackle to right guard. Former Eagle Dave Alexander has been penciled in at center, although he's lost much of his punch. Matt O'Dwyer was the lone consistent force last season at left guard. **Grade: C**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS While the offense struggled, the defense finished sixth overall, and success started up front. The Jets struck it rich in the '95 draft with defensive end Hugh

Douglas, who earned Defensive Rookie of the Year honors. Douglas has that quick outside step that no one can teach. With brute strength to match the speed, Douglas collected 10 sacks. At right end, Marvin Washington is coming off a splendid season. Erik Howard and Matt Brock are run pluggers inside who lack any pass-rush savvy. There is no depth following the releases of Donald Evans and Tony Casillas. The key is obvious: Keep Marvin Jones healthy. Jones managed 10 starts last season, and his presence was dramatic. The Jets allowed only 266 yards a game when he played, 348 when he didn't.

Jones and Mo Lewis are as gifted as any pair of linebackers in the NFL. Their activity helped the defense generate 14 more sacks last season than in '94. **Grade: B+**

SECONDARY This unit was rebuilt last season, and most teams attacked newcomer Otis Smith. Smith responded by grabbing six interceptions, returning one 49 yards for a touchdown. Teams will still pick on him because the unit's best player is third-year starter Aaron Glenn. Don't be fooled by his one interception in two seasons. Quarterbacks don't like testing him because he closes so well. Safety Gary Jones matched Smith with his own 49-yard touchdown return, but the team believes strong safety Victor Green can be a star. **Grade: D**

SPECIAL TEAMS This group was on life support early in the season when Dexter Carter fumbled seven kicks away. Added to those woes were coverage units that finished 25th (kick) and 27th (punt) overall. Brian Hansen punted a club-record 99 times and placed a third of them either inside the 20 or in the end zone. Nick Lowery, 40, figures to do the placekicking after missing only two of 14 inside the 40-yard line. He also nailed two from beyond 50 yards. When Carter was dumped, Ron Carpenter came on to average 26.3 yards per kick return, second in the NFL. **Grade: D**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT Like predecessor Pete Carroll, Kotite was winless in December. But owner Leon Hess responded by giving Kotite more control. There are doubts about his personnel judgments, but on paper the Jets look vastly improved. **Grade: C**

1996 DRAFT They went for receivers in Keyshawn Johnson, who reminds some of Michael Irvin, and Nevada's Alex Van Dyke, who led the nation with 129 receptions for 1,854 yards. Ray Mickens is a great coverage corner who figures to be the starting nickel back. Hugh Hunter had 16 sacks for tiny Hampton (Va.). **Grade: A**

SPORT RATING: C
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 7-9

No. 1 draft choice Keyshawn Johnson should inject new life into the Jets attack.



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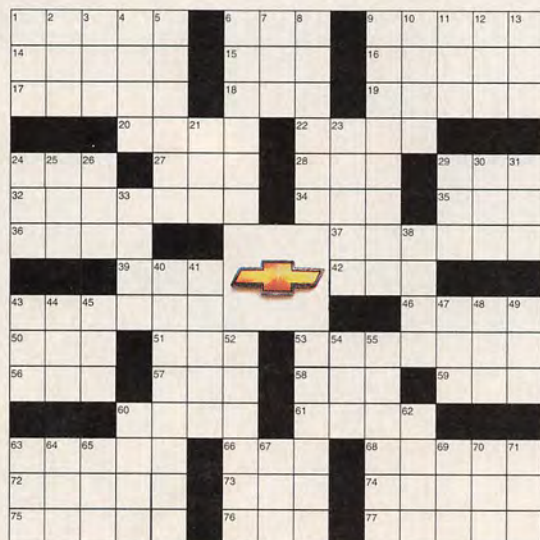
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The Chevrolet Truck Across

SPORTword

Puzzle

By Stanley Newman



1. '96 Masters winner
6. Summerall's former network
9. "THE MOST DEPENDABLE, LONGEST-LASTING TRUCKS"
14. Airport near Wrigley Field
15. Stadium shout
16. Winner of three Olympic skating titles
17. Gainesville athlete
18. ____ 60 (acceleration standard): 2 wds.
19. '60s Indians third baseman
20. After-school groups: Abbr.
22. Frequent factor at Candlestick
24. David Palmer's school: Abbr.
27. Recede
28. Airport stat: Abbr.
29. Barbell units: Abbr.
32. AL pennant-winning manager in '80: 2 wds.
34. Mr. Maxvill
35. "____ of the Tiger" ("Rocky III" tune)
36. "____ Strikes Out" (Pearsall book)
37. NBA, for one
39. Bodybuilder's pride
42. Contract length: Abbr.
43. Get a player for the team: 2 wds.
46. First name of 1987 Australian Open winner
50. ____ guard (archery gear)
51. Formula One racer
53. Home of the America West Arena
56. "No ____!": Roberto Duran
57. Go quickly
58. Sullivan Award awardee: Abbr.
59. Had for dinner
60. ____-tackle (bring down en masse)
61. Tried to score, perhaps
63. Winner of three majors in '53
66. Wipeout, in surfing
68. Emulated the '58 Dodgers
72. Triple Crown horse of '35
73. Commit a hockey infraction
74. Goalie great Francis
75. '60s Giants shortstop
76. Outer-space visitors: Abbr.
77. Bulls, Bears and Bucks

Down

1. Visibility problem
2. Cry of discovery
3. Back muscle, for short
4. Gymnastics maneuver
5. Discus legend
6. Onetime PGA clambake host
7. Face the pitcher
8. Finished third
9. NFL scoring leader in '63
10. Kept from scoring
11. Letter holder: Abbr.
12. Super Bowl ____ (capping the Dolphins' perfect season)
13. Sportscaster's shout
21. Globetrotters founder Saperstein
23. 1960 Summer Olympics host
24. Auto-racing great's monogram
25. Golf ball's position
26. Doctors' organization: Abbr.
29. Relay-race segment
30. Jim McMahon's school: Abbr.
31. Be a spectator at
33. Big name in Vikings history
38. "A Hard Road to Glory" author
40. First player chosen in the AFL draft
41. Ballesteros' homeland
43. J.C. Snead's uncle
44. Keogh alternative
45. Baseball execs: Abbr.
47. "Gimme ____!" (Start of an Auburn cheer): 2 wds.
48. Virginia Tech won it in '95
49. What most managers get eventually
52. '77 Yankee Stadium cheer
53. Boomer stats
54. Newhouser or Reniff
55. U.S. Open champ in 1913
60. Mel Mc ____ ('60s Indians manager)
62. Rainout insurance
63. Infield bounce
64. Ezzard Charles victim of '51
65. One-liner
67. Nightclub routine
69. By way of
70. Shade tree
71. ____ Moines, Iowa

See page 76 for Chevrolet Truck SPORTword Puzzle answers.



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Slash Stewart may be the AFC's best athlete, but he'll be hard-pressed to win the QB job.

OVERVIEW Head coach Bill Cowher has lost four assistants and his starting quarterback, but it's impossible to count his Steelers out. Cowher's overall winning percentage is .672 (43-21), and he's the most innovative coach in the AFC Central, a division he's won three of his four seasons here. But it's improbable to picture Pittsburgh returning to the Super Bowl with either Jim Miller or Kordell Stewart as the starting quarterback. The Steelers overcame a 3-4 start last season because Neil O'Donnell played brilliantly down the stretch, winning eight straight.

QUARTERBACK There are two options, although 11-year veteran Mike Tomczak believes he should be considered a third possibility. Either start Miller, a traditional drop-back passer, or Stewart, a running dynamo who simply might be the AFC's best athlete. Training camp will produce a winner, and Miller, who has attempted 56 career passes, five of them being intercepted, is the projected starter. In two years, Miller has broken his right thumb and wrist. If the former Michigan State star fails, Tomczak could take over. **Grade: D**

RUNNING BACKS The drug arrest of Bam Morris clouded the situation until the draft-day trade for Jerome Bettis. The ex-Battering Ram should rejuvenate his career as an insurance policy for Morris, who led the club with nine touchdowns last season. Bettis is only 24, and unlike Erric Pegram, he has more power and game-breaking speed. Bettis felt shunned by Rams coach Rich Brooks and needs an attitude adjustment under Cowher. Pegram and Fred McAfee will be used as change-up runners, a contrast to the raw power of Bettis. Gone is fullback John L. Williams, whose production nose-dived. Tim Lester, a punishing blocker, was paired with Bettis two seasons ago in Los Angeles. **Grade: C**

RECEIVERS Pittsburgh discovered a go-to receiver in Yancey Thigpen, whose 85 receptions set a team record. Dan Rooney, Pittsburgh's majority owner, caused a stir last season when he proclaimed this group the franchise's best collection of receivers ever. Thigpen's 1,307 yards ranked second in the AFC, while

Ernie Mills was the big-play receiver, catching eight touchdowns with a 17.4 average. Mills should be ready for training camp following ACL surgery. Charles Johnson and Andre Hastings combined for 86 receptions, and both figure to improve. Mark Bruener started at tight end, and no one seemed to miss Eric Green. And don't forget Slash. If Stewart doesn't start at quarterback, he'll be super productive here. **Grade: A**

OFFENSIVE LINE Despite the loss of right tackle Leon Searcy, this unit, as long as left tackle John Jackson recovers from knee surgery, should be as solid as last season. Next to Jackson will be a former Pro Bowl tackle, Will Wolford. Wolford has started eight years at left tackle, although the former Bill and Colt wants to move inside. He'll replace Tom Newberry, who could retire or become the No. 1 backup. Entering his ninth season, center Dermontti Dawson ranks among the game's most complete linemen. Dawson's ability to pull and dominate any defender allows Pittsburgh to have such a versatile running game. Justin Strzelczyk has played everywhere and will be dominant at right tackle. Brendan Stai is another powerbroker at right guard. Bernard Dafney was signed as insurance at left tackle. **Grade: B**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS Greg Lloyd, a four-time All-Pro linebacker, leads this group, which has posted 97 sacks over the past two seasons. Pittsburgh's defense ranked third overall and allowed a TD or field goal on 56 of 193 possessions. Kevin Greene has signed with Carolina, but Pittsburgh is OK because Chad Brown, entering his fourth season, is the best tackler, and Levon Kirkland is the second best. Lloyd has forced 27 fumbles since 1991. Kirkland had an awesome Super Bowl. Brentson Buckner rotated between left end and nose tackle last season and shined at both. Joel Steed is a solid run stopper, while Ray Seals had 8½ sacks, equaling his career best. **Grade: A**

SECONDARY This group proved its versatility in '95, with safety Carnell Lake playing half the season at right cornerback and earning his first Pro Bowl invitation at strong safety. With right cornerback Rod Woodson returning, the Steelers could have the NFL's best secondary. Willie Williams led the AFC with seven interceptions, and he'll have Deon Figures pressing him for a starting spot. Free safety Darren Perry hasn't missed a game since joining the team in 1992, while Lake has missed just three since 1989. This is a tough group that can stuff the run and man cover anyone. **Grade: A**

SPECIAL TEAMS The Steelers had the NFL's best kickoff coverage team, while Norm Johnson made everyone forget Gary Anderson. Johnson (34 of 41) made two game-winning field goals and led the NFL with 141 points, a club record. Rohn Stark, the Colts' all-time punting leader with a 43.45 average, dipped to 40.1 with the Steelers. Ernie Mills averaged 24.2 yards on 54 kickoff returns. **Grade: B**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT Cowher, signed through '97, has made the playoffs in his first four seasons. Owner Dan Rooney and football administrator Tom Donahoe deserve all the credit for choosing Cowher, whose teams have played an emotional defensive style that perfectly fits their coach. Donahoe has had the best draft record in the NFL next to Jimmy Johnson in Dallas. **Grade: A**



1996 DRAFT Jamain Stephens is a gifted tackle, a need considering John Jackson's age and Searcy's departure. Steven Conley is a great all-around athlete who led the SEC with 14 sacks last

season—a definite future replacement for Chad Brown. Jon Wittman is a short-yardage fullback who can catch. Orpheus Roye is quick for a 300-pound tackle. **Grade: B+**

SPORT RATING: B+
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 10-6

OVERVIEW Coach Dave Shula's team turned some heads last season, and the offensive showcase will continue. After going 2-16 in the division in his first three seasons, Shula finished 4-4 in the Central in '95, beating the Steelers in Pittsburgh and ending an 11-year drought in Houston. The Bengals, who lost five games by three points last season, should become a playoff team this year. A lot depends on Ki-Jana Carter's development, but Jeff Blake to Carl Pickens and Darnay Scott will lead to a lot of points.

QUARTERBACK There were moments last season when Blake, who led the AFC with 28 touchdown passes, fired deep like a young Dan Marino. Blake, 25, still needs to improve his completion percentage (57.5) and his touch on short passes, but no one throws a better deep ball. Blake improved his footwork last season, but must refine his three-step drop. Blake has thrown a touchdown pass in 21 straight games, and his 3,822 passing yards ranked seventh in the NFL in '95. Although Blake is still learning, he plays with upmost confidence and verve, traits necessary for the next level of stardom. Erik Wilhelm returns as the backup. **Grade: B+**

RUNNING BACKS The loss of Carter in preseason caught the Bengals by surprise, and the running game was woeful. Harold Green and Eric Bieniemy combined for 1,042 yards, but QB Blake scored as many rushing touchdowns as Green—two—and had a better average, 5.8 to 3.9. Carter, who has looked sharp in drills, has the inside toughness and outside burst to become a 1,000-yard rusher. If that happens, look out. Ex-Charger Eric Bieniemy found a home in this offense, catching 43 passes. He's the ideal specialty back. James Joseph returns as the short-yardage fullback. **Grade: C**

RECEIVERS The definite strength of the team. Pickens became the first Bengal ever to lead the AFC in receiving. He had 17 touchdowns last season, giving him 28 in two seasons and 10 100-yard games over the same span. Pickens beats double-coverage as much with muscle as speed, and what's scary about the Bengals is that third-year receiver Scott is even faster. Scott caught 52 passes last season, three fewer than tight end Tony McGee, who has developed into a midrange force. All three of these play-

ers are under age 26, meaning the future is bright. David Dunn will be a solid third wideout. **Grade: A+**

OFFENSIVE LINE Tackle Joe Walter came out of retirement, and this patched-up group proceeded to allow only 25 sacks, the fewest in club history. Impressive considering Anthony Munoz once played here. The plan is to move left tackle Kevin Sargent to guard and Bruce Kozerski to right guard, freeing up right tackle for No. 1 pick Willie Anderson, who has the body (6-5, 325) but not the maturity (only 20) for the NFL. Anderson has good bal-



ance and those necessary long arms. Darrick Brilz remains a physical center who moves his feet well. Scott Brumfield finished at left guard, but Rich Brahm will push him. This group will look even better with Carter running behind it. **Grade: D**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS Injuries killed whatever consistency defensive coordinator Larry Peccatiello had hoped for. His schemes never worked because John Copeland was the lone regular to start 16 games. Copeland had a breakout year with nine sacks and 55 tackles.

Dan Wilkinson was slowed by a sore back and then missed two games due to a neck injury. Still, Big Daddy led AFC interior linemen with eight sacks. Linebackers James Francis and Steve Torvar are rising stars, and both are capable of big plays. Artie Smith has some pass-rush skills, while tackle Keith Rucker must lose some weight. Outside linebacker Ricardo McDonald was the sixth-leading tackler, had five sacks and was rewarded with a \$900,000 contract. Ex-Brown Gerald Dixon could be the nickel linebacker. **Grade: D**

SECONDARY Free safety Darryl Williams, this group's lone superstar, signed with Seattle, and replacing him might be impossible. Holdovers Sam Shade and Bracey Walker will fight for the spot. Free agency produced three new starters: Ashley Ambrose (Colts) and Jimmy Spencer (Saints) will team at cornerback, while Bo Orlando (Chargers) becomes the strong safety. Corey Sawyer thinks he's a superstar, but he was a big reason the Bengals allowed 62 plays of 20 yards or more. Anthony Prior could be a diamond in the rough. **Grade: C**

SPECIAL TEAMS The special teams were uneven, finishing second (5.7 yards) in punt coverage but last (4.9) in punt returns. But don't blame the kickers. Lee Johnson had another spectacular year punting, averaging 42.1 yards, while Doug Pelfrey closed the season with a 51-yard field goal as time ran out against Minnesota. Pelfrey converted 29 of 36 attempts and finished with a club-record 121 points. **Grade: B**

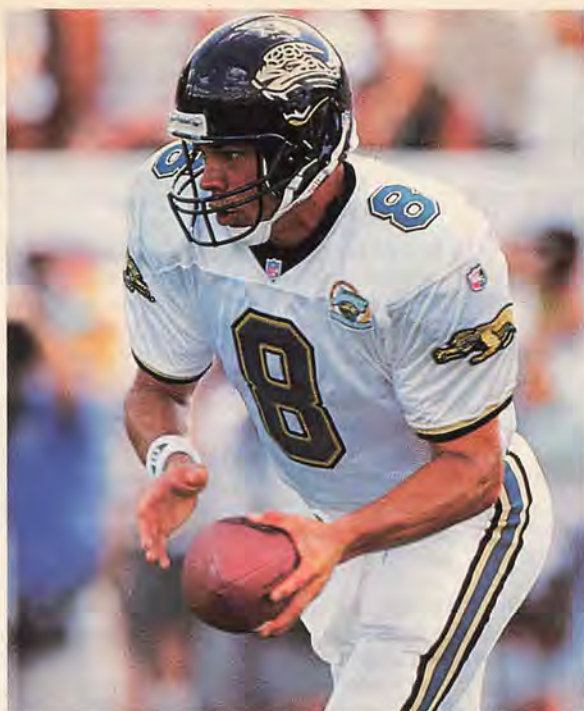
COACHING/MANAGEMENT The voters approved a five-cent tax in March, ensuring a new stadium for the Bengals. David Shula (18-46) has surrounded himself with quality assistants in Bruce Coslet and Peccatiello, but his head should roll if he doesn't finish above .500 with this talented offense. **Grade: C**

1996 DRAFT Everyone knew that Auburn's Willie Anderson, the draft's second-best offensive lineman, was their man. He should be a starter for 10 years. Rutgers' Marco Battaglia has NFL hands and is a super threat because the Bengals use double tight ends 20 percent of the time. Colorado State's Greg Myers, who could start, averaged 15.7 yards as a punt returner. **Grade: B**

SPORT RATING: C+
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 9-7

Jeff Blake
is poised to
lead the
Bengals to their
first playoff run
since 1990.

RICH KANE/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED



Mark Brunell at times resembles a young Steve Young, but needs more patience in the pocket.

OVERVIEW Tom Coughlin proved last season that hard work doesn't necessarily translate into victory. No one worked harder than Coughlin, and yet his Jaguars lost seven straight. In the expansion wars, Carolina finished with seven wins to the Jaguars' four. Although the offensive line is solid, there are holes in every other area. The Jags will be hard-pressed to duplicate last season's "gaudy" .500 record in the AFC Central, which included a victory over AFC champion Pittsburgh.

QUARTERBACK At times, lefty Mark Brunell reminds scouts of a young Steve Young. He shouldn't curtail his scrambling because he did gain over seven yards per scamper, including four touchdowns. But to improve, he must have patience in the pocket. He displayed that temperament in a season-ending victory over Cleveland when he was 17 of 29 for 275 yards and a touchdown. Brunell, who wears Young's number 8, finished with an excellent TD-interception ratio of 2-1. Brunell is the man because Rob Johnson isn't ready and Todd Philcox is simply a reliever. **Grade: C**

RUNNING BACKS Brunell scored as many touchdowns—four—as the team's two top halfbacks, James Stewart and Vaughn Dunbar, combined. Stewart has a bright future after gaining 525 yards while playing on a bum shoulder. But Natrone Means, who was acquired in a waiver-wire transaction, will be the No. 1 runner. The Chargers didn't like his salary demands and his leg injuries, but Means wants to prove them wrong. After three NFL seasons, Means has already gained 2,725 yards and scored 25 touchdowns. Means breaks tackles and wears on defenders. He's just not a game-breaker. Ty Hallock has unretired and could be used as a fullback or tight end. **Grade: B**

RECEIVERS Desmond Howard proved to be a bust, but the Jags still have a nice starting duo in Willie Jackson and ex-Brown Keenan McCardell. If tight end Derek Brown can return from injury, the receiving package is more than adequate. Jackson started 10 games and was the leading receiver with 53

catches. McCardell was Cleveland's top wide receiver with 56 receptions, good for 709 yards and four touchdowns. Jimmy Smith has decent hands and will be a factor in three-receiver sets. Pete Mitchell has great hands but lacks the speed to be effective underneath. **Grade: D**

OFFENSIVE LINE Averaging 6-6, 308 pounds, the Jaguars had the biggest offensive line in the league last season. And their biggest off-season acquisition was Steelers right tackle Leon Searcy, who stands 6-3 and weighs 305. He'll fit perfectly. Searcy, a tremendous run blocker, will allow second-year starter Brian DeMarco to move inside, pushing Ben Coleman into a reserve role. Left tackle is in the good hands of Tony Boselli, who started 12 games after a preseason knee injury. Boselli is 323 pounds and cat-quick. Shawn Bouwens settled down after having uneven years in Detroit. He learned to engage more quickly and neutralize the opponent's power moves. Dave Widell, one of the game's true characters, is the only starter over 30, which raises the starters' average age to 26.6. **Grade: A**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS The Jags failed in their plans to secure a free-agent pass rusher, a real problem based on their NFL-low 17 sacks last season. But their top two choices, Illinois linebacker Kevin Hardy and Texas lineman Tony Brackens, will compensate a little. Hardy, who had 11 sacks last season, will start at strong-side linebacker. Jeff Lageman is the best pure pass rusher, but he was hurt half the time. Joel Smeenge can rush when on a tight end. Kelvin Pritchett was decent against the run, while ex-Packer John Jurkovic is a feisty run defender with limited pass-rush potential. The best player might be second-year stud Bryan Schwartz, whose 88 solo tackles led the team. Ex-Oiler Eddie Robinson has the speed to cover the weak side, plus he's a superb tackler. **Grade: C**

SECONDARY Defensive coordinator Dick Jauron is an excellent secondary teacher who has his hands full. Vinnie Clark and Mickey Washington were two of seven Jaguars who started every game last year. Those two cornerbacks managed only two interceptions. Few clubs believe Dana Hall can be an effective free safety. That's why Monty Grow, who had major knee surgery, could win the spot in training camp. Harry Colon is a heavy hitter better suited to strong safety than free, where Mike Dumas is a solid reserve. Colon, the fourth on the club in tackles, had three interceptions. **Grade: D**

SPECIAL TEAMS Punter Bryan Barker became the first Jaguar to lead the NFL in a category. Barker beat out Lee Johnson by two one-thousandths of an inch for a 38.634 net punting average. Mike Hollis' performance didn't match his strong leg. He did nail two 50-yard field goals, but also missed inside the 27-yard line twice. Jimmy Smith is the best returner, but the Jags are looking to improve. **Grade: D**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT Owner Wayne Weaver has given coach Coughlin and his top executive, Michael Huyghue, tremendous freedom. Coughlin believed his team should have won at least three more games last season. How he deals with the constant losing will determine how long he stays. There isn't a more no-nonsense coach in the league. **Grade: B**

1996 DRAFT They had a great draft, with two potential starters in Butkus Award winner Hardy and lineman Brackens, who had 24 sacks at Texas. Michael Cheever will be worked into center. Receivers Reggie Barlow (led Division 1-AA with a 20.8 punt-return average) and Chris Doering should stick. **Grade: A+**

SPORT RATING: C
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 7-9



OVERVIEW On the heels of a 7-9 season, the Oilers would figure to be better, but don't count on it. There remains indecision over whether to start Steve McNair at quarterback, and owner Bud Adams has made it clear the team's days in the Astrodome are numbered. Season-ticket renewals weren't mailed out until May, and crowds of 25,000 are expected for most games. Coach Jeff Fisher, 38, deserves praise for transforming a bunch of quitters into a competitive lot.

QUARTERBACK Jerry Rhome, the offensive coordinator, wants to keep Chris Chandler as his starting quarterback despite the fact that the eight-year veteran has never been healthy for an entire season. You can't count on him. Granted, Chandler's completion percentage of 63.2 was the NFL's fifth best, and he threw for 17 touchdowns, a career high, but McNair started the last two games and won both of them. And in beating the Jets and Bills, McNair didn't throw an interception. The Oilers want to be cautious, but McNair has a better arm than Chandler and deserves the opportunity. **Grade: C**

RUNNING BACKS Move over, Rodney Thomas, because Heisman Trophy winner Eddie George, who scored 23 touchdowns and gained 1,826 yards for Ohio State, deserves 20 carries a game. George may not be Earl Campbell, but he's close, possessing power through the hole, tremendous vision and a super work ethic. Thomas was an impressive rookie last season, leading the Oilers with 947 yards rushing in only 10 starts. Thomas fumbled too much, but he did display some game-breaking ability with a 74-yard scoring run against Denver. George figures to fill a void left by Todd McNair, who caught 60 passes last year. **Grade: C**

RECEIVERS With the arrival of Kansas City's Willie Davis, the Oilers have two home run threats. Davis has averaged 17.5 yards a catch over the past four seasons, while Chris Sanders merely led the NFL with 23.5 per catch as a rookie. Sanders had nine TDs; Davis had five for the Chiefs. Sanders, who needs to improve his route running, was a workout warrior in the off-season. The plan is to re-sign Haywood Jeffries, a nine-year veteran who once caught 100 passes in a season. Jeffries led the team with 61 last season. Frank Wycheck is a sure-handed tight end who had 40 catches last year. Houston is still looking for a blocking tight end. **Grade: C**

OFFENSIVE LINE This group reduced its sack total from 65 to 32 last season and should continue to improve as center Mark Stepnoski adjusts to his teammates. Stepnoski runs the show, picking up the stunts, which



helps Bruce Matthews, 35, play left guard and covers for Kevin Donnalley's slow feet at right guard. Matthews has a streak of 133 consecutive starts, which includes assignments at all five positions. The right side is shaky, considering that Irv Eatman has old legs and survives on guile at right tackle. Brad Hopkins is an adequate left tackle who still struggles against quicker pass rushers. Erik Norgard is the top reserve. **Grade: C**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS There has been a complete makeover up front, finalized with the cutting of hometown hero Ray Childress. Defensive coordinator Steve Sidwell interjected some sanity into Fisher's 46 defense while producing 38 takeaways. Henry Ford and Anthony Cook combined for nine sacks and are gifted, young pass rushers. Gary Walker was a considerable force as a rookie at left tackle, while Glenn Montgomery could return after injuring his shoulder. Eddie Robinson took his linebacking skills to Jacksonville, but Al Smith returns after missing 14 games with a broken foot. Micheal Barrow replaced Smith in the middle and finished with 86 tackles. Both Barrow and Joe Bowden are potential superstars. **Grade: C**

SECONDARY If they can keep strong safety Blaine Bishop financially happy, this unit is scary. Bishop was selected to his first Pro Bowl last year after leading the Oilers in tackles; he's done that in 11 of his 31 career starts. Right cornerback Darryll Lewis also went to his first Pro Bowl, and he has 11 interceptions over the past two seasons. Lewis knocked down 21 passes last season too. Cris Dishman finally played up to his trash-talking mouth, defending the run better while snaring three interceptions. Marcus Robertson returns to free safety after knee surgery last September. This group can rival Pittsburgh's because of splendid reserves like Steve Jackson and Tomur Barnes. **Grade: A**

SPECIAL TEAMS Mel Gray was beat up most of last season and for the first time in four seasons failed to return a kick for a touchdown. Gray still has all those fearless moves and figures to rebound. Al Del Greco missed only four of 31 field goal attempts and enters this season with a streak of 14 straight. Rich Camarillo accepted a pay cut to return after a horrible 34.8-yard net average. Camarillo, though, is one of six NFL punters to reach 1,000 in his career. **Grade: B**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT A few years back, Fisher was scrambling for work while owning homes in three NFL cities. Yes, he may eventually be moving to Tennessee, but his position is secure. Floyd Reese is a hard-working executive who had his finest draft in 1995. Owner Bud Adams has made enemies in Houston, and now he doesn't have the money to compete in modern free agency. **Grade: B**

1996 DRAFT George will remind some of Earl Campbell because he's such a hard worker and overall super person. He's a punishing runner. Bryant Mix was the third-rated defensive tackle, while Terry Kilens is a pass-rushing linebacker. Safety Anthony Dorsett is cut like his father, ex-Cowboy Tony, with 4.4 speed. **Grade: B**

SPORT RATING: C
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 8-10

Houston, goodbye.
The Oilers and QB Steve McNair look to air out the Dome before their inevitable exit.



OVERVIEW Cleveland fans won't recognize this roster, which has already lost 15 players from last season and figures to be cash poor until a new stadium is built. New coach Ted Marchibroda is a public-relations improvement over Bill Belichick, whose 36-44 record was the second-worst in Browns history. The Ravens, named after Baltimore native Edgar Allan Poe's poem, won't be a factor in the Central.

QUARTERBACK Vinny Testaverde has lost his last four starts to Pittsburgh. Although he was benched by Belichick with the season on the line, Testaverde finished with career bests in percentage (61.5), touchdown-interception ratio (17-10) and quarterback rating (87.8). Vinny still has a winning mark, 17-16, as a starter, although Eric Zeier is definitely the hope of the future. Marchibroda plans to use the Buffalo offense he helped design, and both QBs fit that scheme. **Grade: C**

RUNNING BACKS They couldn't sustain a running game last year. Leroy Hoard followed a good season with an average one, gaining 547 yards—he had 623 yards in seven '94 starts—before going on injured reserve. The Ravens scored only five rushing touchdowns, a franchise low. Earnest Byner had the lone 100-yard rushing game. Tommy Vardell has signed with San Francisco, meaning this team needs a fullback. **Grade: C**

RECEIVERS If Earnest Byner isn't signed, this former Browns team will be without its top two receivers from last season. Byner had 61 receptions, while Keenan McCardell, now with Jacksonville, had 56 catches, four for touchdowns. Andre Rison was the big \$17 million bust, catching only 47 passes for 701 yards and three touchdowns. Those totals were 38, 426 and eight, respectively, below his annual averages. Part of the problem was Rison, part of it was a horrible offensive design by the coaching staff. Marchibroda won't make the same mistake; he'll design the offense around Rison's skills. Michael Jackson came through with nine touchdown grabs, while Derrick Alexander had a horrible sophomore season. Belichick questioned Alexander's toughness. **Grade: C**

OFFENSIVE LINE Maybe No. 1 pick Jonathan Ogden can save the day. How did this team lose nine of 10 in one stretch? Well, the offensive line fell apart. After allowing an NFL-low 14 sacks in 1994, the Browns surrendered 27 in their 11 losses in '95, 32 in all. Ogden, who is a great puller, probably will open at left guard, although he has a tackle's body. It's the best fit now because tackles Tony Jones and Orlando Brown are the best holdover players from last season. Center Steve Everitt wasn't the anchor he had been in his first two pro seasons. He must improve. Seattle's Jeff Blackshear will start at one guard, and Wally Williams is the lone backup with a lot of playing experience. **Grade: C**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS Typical of the Ravens' financial problems: Departed tackle Tim Goad was released, but a \$750,000 bonus he received for recovering two fumbles will count against the 1996 salary cap. Defensive ends Rob Burnett and Anthony Pleasant struggled without Michael Dean Perry and James Jones at tackles. Dan Footman must continue to display the physical burst he did last December. Pepper Johnson, who had 10 games of double-figure tackles, again mans the middle, but he'll be surrounded by youthful question marks in Craig Powell, who missed '95 with a torn ACL, and Mike Caldwell, who missed too many tackles. **Grade: D**

SECONDARY This group was banged up for much of last season, and when it wasn't, it was contributing to the 23 touchdown passes yielded, 10 more than in the previous season. A lower-back injury sidelined All-Pro safety Eric Turner for the second half of the season, and Stevon Moore simply couldn't handle double duty. Moore did have five interceptions. Don Griffin, 32, started to show his age last season, which isn't a good sign for '96. Left cornerback Antonio Langham slipped last year, but Belichick ruined his confidence and Marchibroda expects him to rebound. Vashone Adams started six games for Turner and

pounded like a hammer. **Grade: B**

SPECIAL TEAMS The Ravens no longer have returner McCardell, but Earnest Hunter averaged 22 yards on 23 kickoff returns last season and might pull double duty. But the star is Matt Stover, who has converted 49 of his last 53 field goal attempts. Stover (108 of 134) now has the NFL's best lifetime percentage at 80.6 and also has a streak of 121 PATs. Without Tom Tupa, the Browns gave Greg Montgomery, who sat out last season, \$2 million over five years for his 43.7-yard punting average. **Grade: D**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT Owner Art Modell cleaned house by firing Belichick and sidekick Michael Lombardi, the club's director of player personnel. Now ex-player Ozzie Newsome and Marchibroda, with final approval from Modell, are making the personnel decisions. Modell made this move to Baltimore to save the franchise for his son, David, who turned off a lot of businessmen in Cleveland. **Grade: C**

1996 DRAFT Ogden was the fastest and best lineman in the draft and eventually will move to left tackle. Linebacker Ray Lewis is super quick and a playmaker, but he's too small to push Pepper Johnson in the middle. DeRon Jenkins may be the starting nickel back, while Maryland's Jermaine Lewis (12.7 average) could be the opening-week punt returner. Jon Stark is a decent quarterback prospect. The Ravens failed to address their running-back need. **Grade: C**

SPORT RATING: C-
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 5-11



Baltimore must find a way to better integrate former All-Pro Andre Rison into the offense.



RICH KANE/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

Coleman and O'Mar Ellison for the other starting spot. The trio totaled five catches last season. Alfred Pupunu is coming off a subpar season. **Grade: C**

OFFENSIVE LINE What used to be the strongest part of the team self-destructed last season. Granted, there were injuries, but the line committed 30 holding and 19 false-start/offside penalties. New line coach Jack Henry has his hands full, though he's blessed with great depth and center Courtney Hall, a tenacious blocker who holds the line together. Harry Swayne and Isaac Davis are coming off disappointing seasons, while Joe Coccozzo and Vaughn Parker were fairly steady on the right side. Eric Moten continues to progress after a serious knee injury and figures to play better than he did last season. Swayne must be signed, or the Chargers will have to do more shifting. **Grade: A**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS The Chargers have the game's premier linebacker in Junior Seau, who led the team in tackles for the fifth consecutive season. Seau lines up inside, shielded by monster tackles Shawn Lee and Reuben Davis, which allows him to utilize his tremendous lateral pursuit. Beathard tired of clubhouse lawyer Leslie O'Neal and didn't bid to re-sign him, instead enticing Marco Coleman away from Miami with a \$4 million signing bonus. Coleman is a team guy, although few expect him to replace O'Neal's 105½ sacks in nine seasons. Chris Mims went soft last year, his sack total dropping from 11 to two. He's been working out feverishly in the off-season; a return to his '94 level would be quite a boost to the Chargers. Kurt Gouveia, the savvy 10-year pro who did such a splendid job in Philadelphia, will line up next to Seau. **Grade: A**

Holding off the peerless Junior Seau will again be the top task for Chargers opponents this season.

1996 OVERVIEW The Chargers somehow survived a rotten attitude to make the playoffs last season. But the ugliness compelled general manager Bobby Beathard to conduct some housecleaning—he simply waived Natrone Means—and the young Chargers took notice. Coach Bobby Ross likes the make-up of this club, which will go as far as Stan Humphries takes it. It's a hungry bunch, determined to make amends for a hometown loss in the playoffs.

QUARTERBACK Humphries passed for a career-high 3,381 yards last season, but his best mark is 38-17, his win-loss record as San Diego's starter. Humphries, 31, is a confident leader who was simply abandoned last season by his receivers, who dropped too many balls. The Chargers averaged only 17 points in their opening 10-game funk, and Humphries couldn't bail them out. Humphries loves to throw the deep ball, but he has the patience to go underneath. He reads defenses well and can gut out a win with the toughest. Sean Salisbury, who sat out much of '95, has the arm strength to equal Humphries'. **Grade: B+**

RUNNING BACKS The backfield will look strange without Means and Ronnie Harmon, two constants the past three seasons. But Aaron Hayden proved he belonged last December, averaging 97 yards a game as San Diego won all four of his starts. Hayden has a quick burst and is fearless. The pressure is on 5-8 Terrell Fletcher, who must replace Harmon's receiving skills. Beathard is giving fullback Leonard Russell another chance. An MRI on Russell's sprained neck was negative, but this is his fourth team in six years. Lack of depth is a minus. **Grade: C**

RECEIVERS The housecleaning continued in this department, where Tony Martin is the lone returning veteran after Shawn Jefferson and Mark Seay signed with the Patriots and Eagles, respectively. However, Jefferson and Seay's combined 1,158 receiving yards didn't equal Martin's mark of 1,224 on 90 catches. If Martin ever cures his dropsies, he'll be another Jerry Rice. Jimmy Oliver, the fastest Charger, should beat out Andre

SECONDARY For the third straight season, the Chargers could start a different set of safeties. Rodney Harrison, who was hurt much of last season, and old-timer Kevin Ross, who wore out his welcome in Atlanta, could be the starting tandem. There's a lot of talent at cornerback, where Darrien Gordon is expected to return. As a rookie last season, Terrence Shaw was exposed, finally losing his job to Willie Clark. Dwayne Harper was the most consistent cover man and is solid at left cornerback. Ex-Bear Shaun Gayle had a 99-yard interception return last year and could start ahead of Ross at strong safety. **Grade: B+**

SPECIAL TEAMS John Carney was clutch when the Chargers needed him; they simply didn't call often. Carney improved his kickoff distances, finishing in the top third. Australian Darren Bennett went from walk-on to All-Pro after averaging 44.7 yards a punt and placing 28 kicks inside the 20-yard line. Coleman returned two kickoffs and one punt for touchdowns last season, although he also had his share of fumbles, making every return that much more exciting. **Grade: A**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT Ross works late, never misses a detail and has the respect of his peers, although he remains frustrated with some players' apparent lack of pride. He and Beathard have a great working relationship. **Grade: A**

1996 DRAFT Few could figure out what Beathard was doing. He again traded next year's first-round choice, this time using the 41st overall selection on Virginia Tech receiver Bryan Still, whose 4.38 40-yard time was second-fastest among receivers. But Still caught only 38 passes last season. Patrick Sapp, a 258-pound ex-quarterback who played one season at linebacker, was the second choice, and Junior Soli, an Arkansas player the NFL didn't have listed, was taken in the fifth round. **Grade: D**

SPORT RATING: A
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 11-5



1996 OVERVIEW No one is convinced that Kansas City, the team and the city, has recovered from the playoff collapse of last season. After winning 13 games, the Chiefs were the AFC favorites to reach the Super Bowl. But they lost at Arrowhead in the first round as quarterback Steve Bono self-destructed, throwing three interceptions. Lin Elliott, who also choked, doesn't return, but Bono does. K.C. is a playoff team but not Super Bowl material.

QUARTERBACK The proverbial backup, Bono enters his 12th season with a 20-7 record as a starter, yet also with the knowledge that he misfired on 14 of 25 attempts while producing only seven points against the Colts. Bono's tailspin came after he led the Chiefs to two overtime victories and had 21 touchdowns to 10 interceptions. But his quarterback rating of 79.5 ranked 21st, and Kansas City, despite owning the league's best rushing game, ranked 16th overall in scoring efficiency. You can blame the quarterback or Paul Hackett's play-calling. This year, coach Marty Schottenheimer won't hesitate to insert Rich Gannon. **Grade: D**

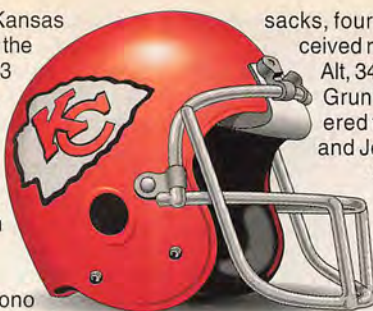
RUNNING BACKS Marcus Allen will return for a 15th season, and why shouldn't he? He's coming off his best work—207 carries for 890 yards—in a decade, and he's only seven rushing touchdowns short of tying Walter Payton's all-time NFL record of 110. The Chiefs averaged 139 rushing yards a game, best in the NFL. Greg Hill gained 667 and Bono had that record 76-yard touchdown scamper against Arizona. Kimble Anders led the Chiefs in receptions for the second straight season (122 in two years), and he's coming off his finest rushing season with 398 yards. Donnell Bennett is a classic bulldozing fullback. **Grade: B**

RECEIVERS Gone is Willie Davis' speed, but there are plenty of targets in Lake Dawson, second-year sensation Tamarick Vanover, Danan Hughes and seldom-used Victor Bailey, who cost GM Carl Peterson a second-round choice in '95. Tight end Keith Cash had 42 catches last season, more than Dawson and the rest of the wideouts. Part of the problem is Bono's arm strength; he can't deliver deep accurately. Vanover and Hughes are above-average speedsters, while Dawson needs to be more exact on his routes. **Grade: C**

OFFENSIVE LINE

This group may be the AFC's best. Art Shell taught this line well last year, as it allowed only 21 sacks while opening the holes for the No. 1 rushing offense. In the last six seasons, the Chiefs have allowed only 166

A disastrous playoff performance has Steve Bono hoping to keep a grip on his starting job.



sacks, fourth-lowest total in the NFL. Everybody received new contracts last year, meaning that John Alt, 34, returns at left tackle, along with center Tim Grunhard and right guard Will Shields, considered the best all-around lineman. Ricky Siglar and Jeff Criswell split time at right tackle. Dave Szott has missed two starts in the last five years. Joe Valerio has caught four touchdowns in his tackle-eligible role. **Grade: A+**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS

The Chiefs had the No. 2-rated defense last season, the best turnover ratio (+12) and the best scoring allowance—20.1 percent, meaning opponents failed to score on 155 of 194 possessions. The defense scored four touchdowns, two of which decided games. Neil Smith led the way with 12 sacks, and linemen Dan Saleaumua, Joe Phillips and Vaughn Booker all played well. Derrick Thomas has made the Pro Bowl in each of his seven seasons, and his 85 sacks since 1989 rank third among NFL starters. There is a chance Anthony Davis will supplant George Jamison as a starting linebacker, while middle linebacker Tracy Simien has his sights set on leading the Chiefs in tackles for the fifth straight season. **Grade: B+**

SECONDARY The good news is that free safety Mark Collins decided not to retire. This group ranked fifth with 201 passing yards allowed per game. Left cornerback Dale Carter was the key reason, as he developed Deion Sanders-like coverage skills; some in the AFC claim he is even a better cornerback than Sanders. Both Carter and James Hasty are aggressive in their coverages, while Brian Washington and Collins are fearless in center field. Hasty led the team with 76 solo tackles. William White is a backup who could start for at least 10 NFL teams. **Grade: B**

SPECIAL TEAMS Vanover scored on two kickoffs and one punt (a memorable return that beat San Diego in overtime) to rank among the NFL's best. He averaged 26 yards on kicks and 10.6 on punts. Louis Aguiar is a super punter who had a 43.8-yard average while placing 29 boots inside the 20. Steve Szerey, a star in the World League, figures to replace Elliott, who missed six of his last 11 field goal attempts. **Grade: B**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT

Schottenheimer's lifetime mark of 116-66-1 in Kansas City and Cleveland, a winning percentage of .637, ranks third among active coaches. He is a master motivator who always has his teams well-prepared. But greatness is measured in championships, and Marty has lost 10 of 15 playoff games. GM Carl Peterson has made millions for owner Lamar Hunt. **Grade: A**

1996 DRAFT Worried that safety Mark Collins might retire, the Chiefs loaded up in the secondary, starting with Memphis safety Jerome Woods, who is a heavy hitter. Cornerback Reggie Tongue failed to intercept a pass in his senior year at Oregon State. UCLA linebacker Donnie Edwards is undersized, much like Pittsburgh's Carnell Lake was. John Brown got into a lot of trouble at West Virginia and lacked durability. **Grade: C**

SPORT RATING: B+

1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 9-7



At 36, Denver's John Elway continues to scramble away from the advance of age.

1996 OVERVIEW They beat the Raiders twice last season, John Elway threw a career-high 26 touchdowns...and Denver missed the playoffs. Mike Shanahan has a scary offensive attack in place, so he focused on signing some ex-49ers to play defense: linebacker Bill Romanowski, end Alfred Williams and cornerback Toi Cook. If the defense can simply make some plays (21 takeaways last year ranked 29th in NFL), the Broncos will better last year's 8-8 record.

QUARTERBACK Elway keeps pushing back the clock, and one figures he'll be sharp this year at age 36. After he starts the first two games of this season, he'll pass ESPN's Tom Jackson for most games played (191) by a Bronco. He needs 3,294 passing yards—his 3,970 last year ranked fifth in the NFL—to reach 45,000. Elway has 225 career touchdown passes and has 30 fourth-quarter, game-winning scoring drives, the most ever by an NFL quarterback. His career should be extended by Denver's new running game. T.J. Rubley will battle Bill Musgrave for backup duties. **Grade: A**

RUNNING BACKS The steal of last year's draft was Terrell Davis, whose 1,117 yards ranked third in the AFC and whose salary of \$119,000 was the lowest on Denver's roster. He was the lowest-drafted rookie (196th) ever to run for 1,000 yards. Davis reminds many of a young Marcus Allen; he follows his blocks, quickly hits the hole and uses his speed to angle away from pursuers. Despite missing two starts, he also finished with 49 receptions. Fullback Aaron Craver has bulked up to 230 pounds to better burrow his way inside; he scored six touchdowns last season. Glyn Milburn was traded, so Denver doesn't have a solid backup for Davis. **Grade: B**

RECEIVERS Anthony Miller was clutch; 45 of his 59 receptions last season were good for first downs. His 14 touchdowns was a career and team record. Miller and Elway are finally on the same page after a confused first season. However, Shannon Sharpe, a tight end in a wideout's body, remains Elway's go-to guy. Sharpe missed four games and still led the Broncos with 63 receptions.

Shanahan believes the offense can survive without Mike Pritchard. Ed McCaffrey had more receptions than Pritchard (39-33) and is a more exact route runner. Rod Smith, who caught a 43-yard touchdown pass to beat the Redskins in the final seconds, has impressed Shanahan in spring workouts. **Grade: A**

OFFENSIVE LINE This group is coming off a great season in which it yielded only 26 sacks, the lowest Denver total in 14 seasons, and pounded holes for a running game that averaged 125 yards a contest. Gary Zimmerman and Mark Schlereth are the tough guys on the left side. How tough is Schlereth? He's overcome bad knees to start every game, and he played against the Raiders only hours after passing a kidney stone. Tom Nalen is an undersized center who relies on his quick feet and hands. Right tackle Broderick Thompson has improved his footwork, and it's tough to break his holds. Beside Thompson at right guard is Brian Habib, the line's weak link. Keith Kartz is attempting to make a comeback from a serious knee injury. **Grade: C**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS The pass rush must improve, as the Broncos have managed only 53 sacks in the last two seasons, or one fewer than what the 1991 team totaled. James Jones and Michael Dean Perry were solid at tackle; Perry led with six sacks. To improve the rush, Alfred Williams (4½ sacks with 49ers) was signed for \$9 million over five years, and Dan Williams, who has had eight knee operations in three seasons, must produce big-time. Simon Fletcher, who had 41½ sacks in the last four years, retired. Bill Romanowski comes over from Philadelphia to man the middle, while two lightweights, Glenn Cadrez and Allen Aldridge, open on the outside. This explains why Denver allowed an average of 118 yards rushing last season. **Grade: F**

SECONDARY Steve Atwater is an All-Pro, but he and fellow safety Tyrone Braxton were forced to make too many tackles last season. They finished with 258 stops, a big reason why Denver finished 15th overall in defense. Ex-Raider Lionel Washington and Ray Crockett both started 16 games last season but failed to intercept a single pass. They are the starters, but Randy Hilliard and Toi Cook will press them. Someone must start making plays. Rondell Jones has more speed than reserve safety Tim Hauck. **Grade: C**

SPECIAL TEAMS Jason Elam nailed five 50-yard field goals last season, including a 56-yarder. He not only has the distance, but since 1993 has made 61 of 65 attempts inside 40 yards. Punter Tom Rouen still has one of the NFL's best hang times, as his 37.6 net average attests. Having to replace Milburn, who set an NFL record with 404 all-purpose yards in a single game last season, could affect Denver's playoff chances. Rod Smith, who handled four kicks last season, takes over. **Grade: C**

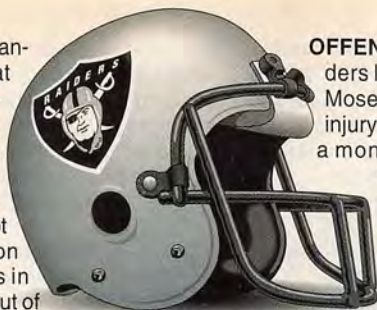
COACHING/MANAGEMENT Mike Shanahan has the final say on contracts and personnel decisions, answering only to owner Pat Bowlen. In less than two years, Shanahan has dumped his college scouting director and pro personnel chief. Shanahan, who had no power with Al Davis' Raiders, is making sure he has all the responsibility now. **Grade: B**

1996 DRAFT Linebacker John Mobley might not start, but he's a tremendous athlete and the first to be taken from tiny Kutztown (Pa.) State since Andre Reed. Quarterback Jeff Lewis broke his collarbone last season, but the 6-2 passer from Northern Arizona has potential. Cornerback Tory James played with a sore hamstring at LSU last season and could be a true sleeper. **Grade: C**

SPORT RATING: C
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 8-8



1996 OVERVIEW There has not been another NFL team in the last decade that has had so much talent and done so little with it. The Raiders started 8-2 last season, lost six straight, and missed the playoffs for the seventh time in 10 seasons. Once again, the Raiders resemble a collection of superb talent, not a talented team. They quit last season despite returning to their rabid fans in Oakland, and the playoffs again look out of reach.

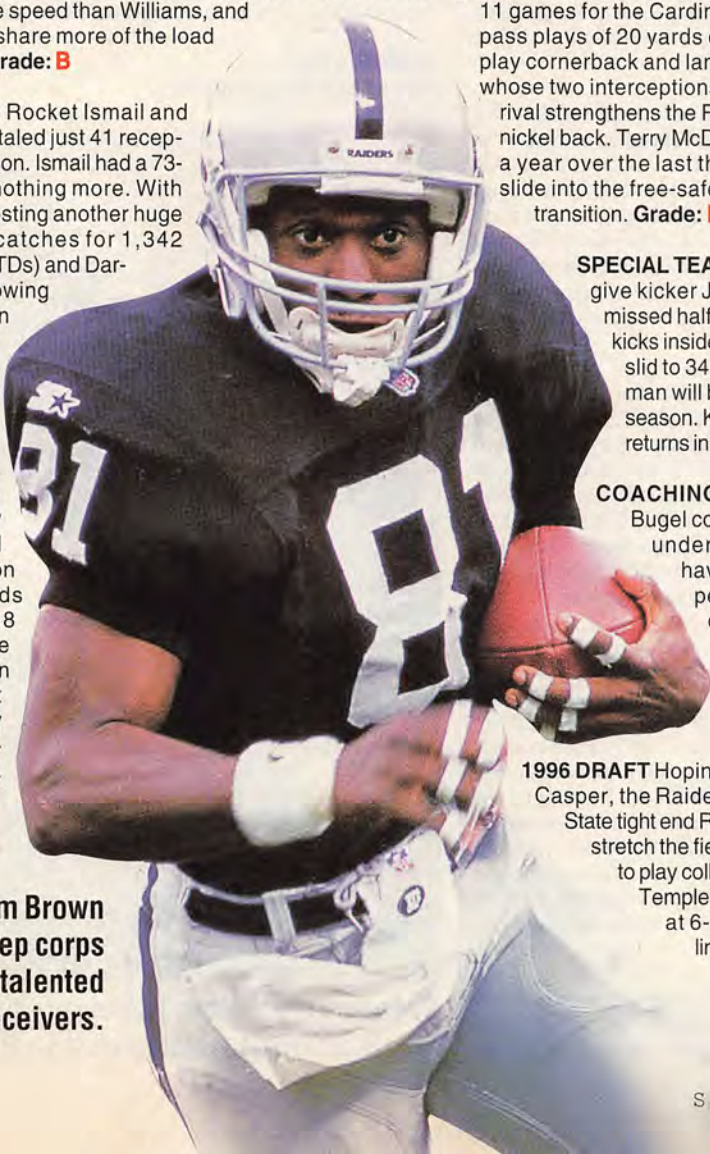


QUARTERBACK Jeff Hostetler will be dealing with his third offensive coordinator in three years, and the latest, Larry Kennan, vows to unleash the vertical passing game. Hoss, who has had shoulder surgery, believes he still has the muscle to go downtown, and the Raiders seem convinced, extending his contract four years. Hoss wasn't physically right the past two seasons. If it wasn't his shoulder, it was his elbow. The 35-year-old quarterback is a leader and has won a Super Bowl (with the Giants), but he has never been a great deep-ball thrower, although he has a soft touch and delivers well on the run. Vince Evans will probably return for a 16th season. **Grade: C**

RUNNING BACKS For two years of durability and production, Harvey Williams was rewarded with a \$2.5 million signing bonus. He's scampered for 2,209 yards in the last two seasons with his jitterbug moves and corner-turning speed. His 1,489 total yards ranked fourth among AFC runners in '95. Derrick Fennor returns to block and catch screen passes. Napoleon Kaufman has more speed than Williams, and he figures to share more of the load this season. **Grade: B**

RECEIVERS Rocket Ismail and James Jett totaled just 41 receptions last season. Ismail had a 73-yard TD but nothing more. With Tim Brown posting another huge season (89 catches for 1,342 yards and 10 TDs) and Darryl Hobbs showing he can catch in traffic, the Raiders have a roster full of talented speedsters. Rookie tight end Rickey Dudley should start, based on his sure hands and 4.48 speed. Anyone would be an improvement over Kerry Cash and Andrew Glover. **Grade: B**

All-Pro Tim Brown leads a deep corps of fast, talented Raiders receivers.



OFFENSIVE LINE Line coach Joe Bugel worked wonders last season, especially after losing center Don Mosebar to retirement and left tackle Gerald Perry to injury early in the year. Bugel's techniques worked for a month, but the penalties started to pile up after Hostetler damaged his throat and shoulder; of 134 penalties, 31 were holding calls. And to compound matters, Steve Wisniewski doesn't dominate anymore despite his Pro Bowl reputation. The Raiders must re-sign Perry and learn to survive with Dan Turk at center and

Kevin Gogan at right guard. At right tackle, ex-Patriot Pat Harlow has lost some toughness, but he's still an upgrade over Rich Stephens. **Grade: D**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS There were rumblings within the Raiders that Chester McGlockton took too many plays off last season. So Al Davis signed hardworking tackle Russell Maryland away from the Cowboys to serve as a role model. McGlockton may have the best combination of size, quickness and strength in the NFL. Pat Swilling turned back the clock last season, collecting 13 sacks and forcing four fumbles. Anthony Smith remains weak against the run but a strong outside rusher. Nolan Harrison figures to be a swingman. Mike Jones led a young, talented group of linebackers with 101 tackles. Greg Biekert and Rob Frederickson continued to show improvement. **Grade: B**

SECONDARY Patrick Bates never returned from retirement, and Eddie Anderson showed significant signs of slowing down. The new strong safety is Lorenzo Lynch, who started 11 games for the Cardinals last year. After surrendering 52 pass plays of 20 yards or more, the Raiders needed a big-play cornerback and landed Super Bowl MVP Larry Brown, whose two interceptions doomed the Steelers. Brown's arrival strengthens the Raiders, who will shift Albert Lewis to nickel back. Terry McDaniel has averaged six interceptions a year over the last three seasons. Derrick Hoskins will slide into the free-safety role unless Lewis can make that transition. **Grade: B**

SPECIAL TEAMS Cole Ford might stick around and give kicker Jeff Jaeger fits this summer. Jaeger missed half the '95 season and missed two of 12 kicks inside 40 yards. Jeff Gossett's net average slid to 34.7, 11th in the AFC. Brown and Kaufman will be among the NFL leaders again this season. Kaufman averaged 26 yards on 22 kick returns in '95. **Grade: C**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT The word is that Bugel could be coaching this team if it falters under Mike White. Al Davis denies he'll have a quick hook this season, but few people believe him. Davis has eased off on his sideline coaching, but his impact can't be negated. Bruce Allen has successfully made the transition from agent to personnel director. **Grade: C**

1996 DRAFT Hoping he's another Ray Chester or Dave Casper, the Raiders traded three picks to select Ohio State tight end Rickey Dudley ninth overall. Dudley can stretch the field and block and was athletic enough to play college basketball. Lance Johnstone was Temple's MVP last season and has 4.5 speed at 6-4, 248 pounds. A great, instinctive linebacker. **Grade: A**

SPORT RATING: C
1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 7-9

1996 OVERVIEW The distractions have already taken their toll. Whatever momentum Dennis Erickson was trying to build with a season-ending six wins in Seattle's last eight games was undermined by owner Ken Behring's insistence to relocate to Southern California. The team even practiced in Anaheim last March, only to have the moving vans haul the weights and uniforms back to Seattle. The players, caught in the middle, want to remain in the Northwest; they'll get their wish when Microsoft's Paul Allen purchases the club.

QUARTERBACK Rick Mirer's style—his ability to make decisions on the run, to throw the safe, sure pass—was supposed to be ideal for Erickson's quick-read offense. But Mirer failed miserably, increasing his interceptions from seven to 20 while finishing with a career-low 63.7 quarterback rating. He does have a quick delivery, but he struggled when looking for secondary targets. Mirer should be a 60-percent passer in this system, and he's worked hard in the off-season with coach Rich Olson to make it happen. John Friesz, who started three games, actually performed better than Mirer. **Grade: F**

RUNNING BACKS Expect Chris Warren to race to his fifth consecutive 1,000-yard season this year. In the last three seasons, only Emmitt Smith and Barry Sanders have gained more than Warren's 4,980-yard total. Warren, 28, dominates a game with powerful strides and deceiving cut-back speed. He was a monster last season with eight 100-yard games and 16 touchdowns. Armed with a new \$10 million contract, Warren is a class act who deserves more national attention. Mack Strong is a goal-line blocker. There's hope that fullback Steve Smith will return from a neck injury. **Grade: A**

RECEIVERS For the first time ever, Seattle had four offensive players last season exceed 1,000 yards, and two of them were receivers—the much-troubled Brian Blades and big-play rookie Joey Galloway. Galloway was instant excitement; he averaged 45 yards on his nine touchdowns. The two complement each other: Blades is exact and tough to cover underneath; Galloway is dip-and-go, separating from his defender at 30 yards. Ricky Proehl and Robb Thomas are sure-handed third receivers. Christian Fauria is a better blocker than tight end Carlester Crumpler. **Grade: A**

OFFENSIVE LINE Give these guys credit for opening a few holes. Jim Sweeney, 34, arrived from the Jets to anchor the line at center, where he could be pushed by right guard Kevin Mawae, who has bulked up to 296 pounds. James Atkins is a talented youngster at left tackle, while Howard Ballard played every snap at right tackle. Atkins is so good that Ray Roberts won't be missed. Matt Joyce still has some technique to learn, overweight Derrick Graham receives a last chance, and Mike Keim is a valuable reserve capable of playing guard or tackle. **Grade: C**

DEFENSIVE LINE/LINEBACKERS Cortez Kennedy's frustration continues—10½ sacks in two seasons—because Sam Adams has failed at being his interior sidekick. Kennedy quit team workouts after David Behring, the owner's son, called him “fat, lazy and lacking in leadership.” Teams will continue to effectively double-team Kennedy until Michael Sinclair and Antonio Edwards start playing like Reggie White. The Seahawks allowed 133 rushing yards a game last season, and we don't foresee any improvement. Strong-side linebacker Terry Wooden, who had 135 tackles last season, is the lone bright spot. Dean Wells and Winston Moss are solid, unspectacular linebackers. Joe Nash, who has played in 125 consecutive games, keeps trucking along at left tackle. **Grade: F**

SECONDARY One of these years, Nate Odomes is going to show up and be able to play. He's missed the last two seasons after never missing a game when he played with the Bills. Sel-

wyn Jones, last year's nickel back, remains the best cover guy, while Carlton Gray and Corey Harris seem to be backpedaling away from trouble. The cure might be the arrival of ex-Bengals strong safety Darryl Williams, who came West after signing a \$1.65 million bonus. Williams was the Bengals' best defender the past two seasons. Eugene Robinson is an underrated free safety. **Grade: C**

SPECIAL TEAMS Rick Tuten became the first Seahawks punter to lead the NFL in gross average (45.0), and along the way boomed a record-setting 73-yarder. Todd Peterson did a solid job replacing John Kasay, but he had two kickoffs returned for touchdowns. Steve Broussard may duplicate his 1,000-yard kickoff-return season, while Galloway is always a threat to go all the way. **Grade: A**

COACHING/MANAGEMENT Erickson designed an offense that gained 5,270 yards, the most by a Seattle team since 1986. However, the Seahawks haven't been to the playoffs since 1987, and Erickson will be hard-pressed to overcome the emotional damage done to the fans and the players by owner Behring. A sale to the billionaire Allen seems the only answer. **Grade: D**

1996 DRAFT The Seahawks were able to trade down and still get their wish: Boston College tackle Pete Kendall, who could be switched to guard this season, allowing Kevin Mawae to shift to center. Fred Thomas isn't physical enough to be a great cornerback, but he has the speed to be a punt returner. Rutgers tackle Robert Barr has the size, balance and quickness; now he must commit to the weight room to be a great blocker. **Grade: C**

SPORT RATING: D

1996 PREDICTED RECORD: 6-10



Speedy wideout Joey Galloway was one of four Seahawks to total more than 1,000 yards.

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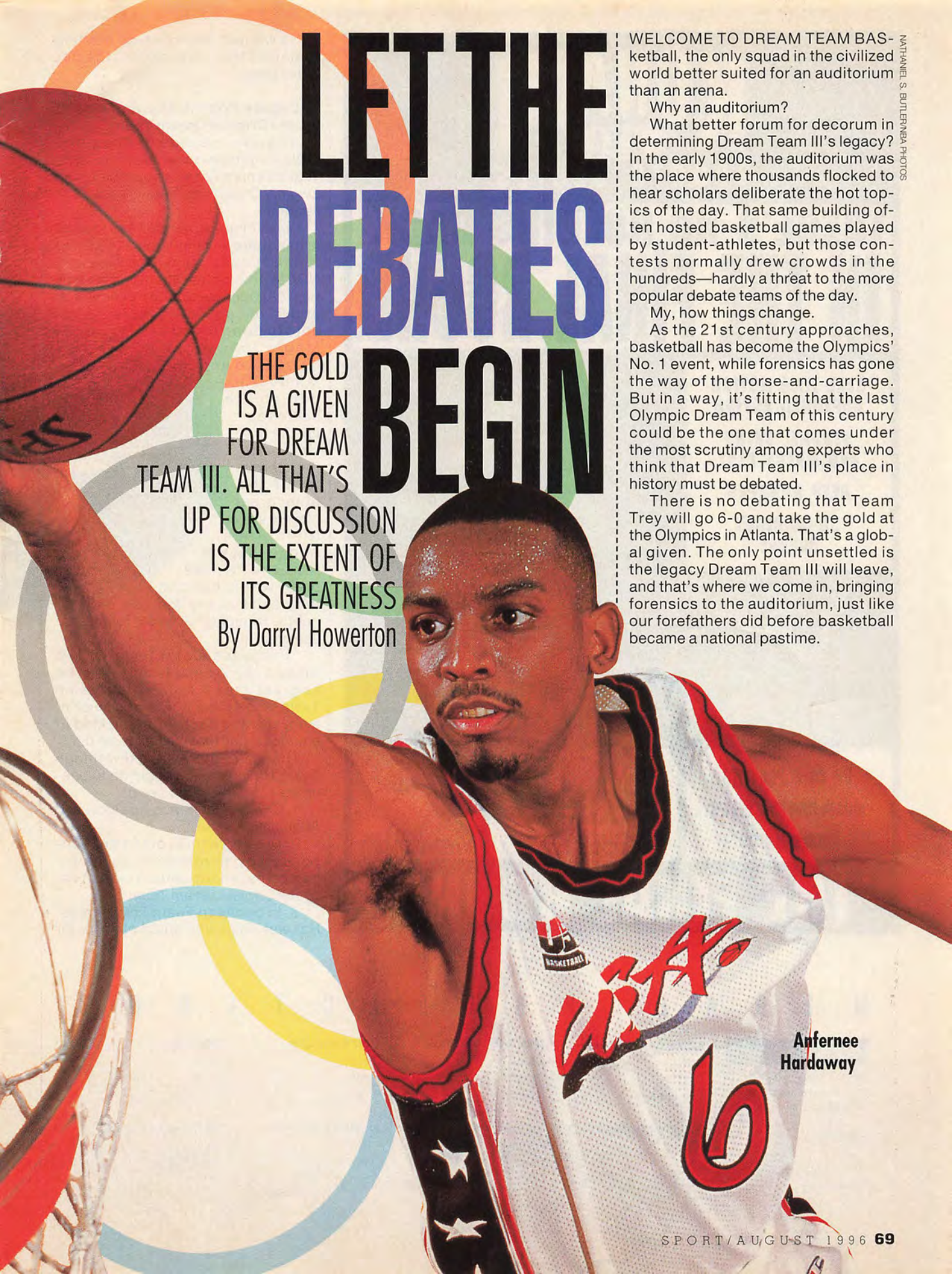
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LET THE DEBATES BEGIN

THE GOLD
IS A GIVEN
FOR DREAM
TEAM III. ALL THAT'S
UP FOR DISCUSSION
IS THE EXTENT OF
ITS GREATNESS
By Darryl Howerton

WELCOME TO DREAM TEAM BASKETBALL, the only squad in the civilized world better suited for an auditorium than an arena.

Why an auditorium?

What better forum for decorum in determining Dream Team III's legacy? In the early 1900s, the auditorium was the place where thousands flocked to hear scholars deliberate the hot topics of the day. That same building often hosted basketball games played by student-athletes, but those contests normally drew crowds in the hundreds—hardly a threat to the more popular debate teams of the day.

My, how things change.

As the 21st century approaches, basketball has become the Olympics' No. 1 event, while forensics has gone the way of the horse-and-carriage. But in a way, it's fitting that the last Olympic Dream Team of this century could be the one that comes under the most scrutiny among experts who think that Dream Team III's place in history must be debated.

There is no debating that Team Trey will go 6-0 and take the gold at the Olympics in Atlanta. That's a global given. The only point unsettled is the legacy Dream Team III will leave, and that's where we come in, bringing forensics to the auditorium, just like our forefathers did before basketball became a national pastime.

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So without further adieu, it's time to pound the gavel and let the debates begin.

Debate Point A: Dream Team III vs. the Original Dream Team

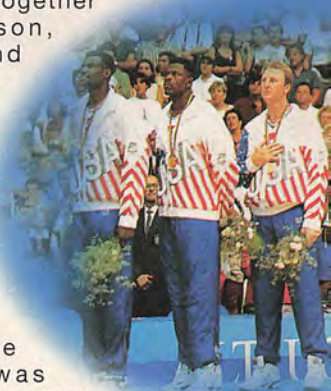
Nobody this side of Shaquille O'Neal ventures to proclaim that this year's Dream Team is superior to the *Original Dream Team* (italicized out of respect).

"One thing we have to keep in mind is that there will never be a team like the first one," says Bob Costas, NBC's host of the Olympics festivities. "A) because of the novelty of it, and B) because they were able to bring together Magic Johnson, Larry Bird and Michael Jordan on the same team for the first time, and then throw in all the other great players still in their prime. Add to that the fact that it was pretty well-known that this was it for Larry Bird, and people thought that was it for Magic Johnson."

"This year's Dream Team, while it will be a phenomenal team, will not be as great a team as the first Dream Team, and neither will it be as much of a novelty and have the same kind of emotional pull that the first team did."

That said, there are a few things Team: Trey members could do to one-up the *Original Dream Team*:

1. Charles Barkley could elbow two Angolans.
2. Dream Team III could beat opponents by more than 44 points per game, the record-setting margin set by the *Original Dream Team*.
3. In between Team Trey games, Hakeem Olajuwon could play center



MIKE POWELL/ALLSPORT

M E D A L P R E D I C T I O N S

TEAM MEDALS

SPORT's forecast for the high-profile team sports, in order of gold, silver, bronze:

BASEBALL

Cuba
USA
South Korea

MEN'S BASKETBALL

USA
Croatia
Yugoslavia

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

USA
China
Brazil

MEN'S GYMNASTICS

China
Russia
Japan

WOMEN'S GYMNASTICS

Romania
China
USA

MEN'S SOCCER

Brazil
France
Argentina

WOMEN'S SOCCER

USA
Norway
China

SOFTBALL

USA
China
Australia

MEN'S VOLLEYBALL

Italy
Netherlands
USA

and lead his native Nigerian team to the silver medal.

4. Dream Team III could beat every foe by 33 points or more, as the *Original Dream Team* did.

5. Scottie Pippen could hold Bulls teammate Toni Kukoc scoreless and let the Croatian know how it feels to be a 76er and lose by 40.

Debate Point B: Dream Team III vs. Dream Team II

No contest. Team Two was able to beat its World Games opponents by an impressive 38 points per game, but that point aside, we feel there's no comparison. Team Two did not have one player who could be classified as a surefire Hall of Famer if his career were to end today. Team Trey, on the other hand, sports Olajuwon, David Robinson, Karl Malone, Barkley, Pippen and John Stockton, all of whom not only would be first-ballot Hall of Famers today, they're still in top form, evidenced by the All-NBA honors accorded to each this past season.

Debate Point C: Dream Team III vs. Nightmare Team III

We cannot tell you who that competing Nightmare Team will be, or even if it exists. The only opponents who have a remote chance of challenging Team Trey are the Croatian team, led by 27-year-old Toni Kukoc and 29-year-old Dino Radja, and the Yugoslavian team, led by Vlade Divac, 28, and Sasha Danilovic, 26.

We seriously doubt, however, that either can come within 33 points of Team Trey. If these teams were unit-



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M E D A L P R E D I C T I O N S

WOMEN'S VOLLEYBALL

Cuba
Brazil
USA

WATER POLO

Hungary
Italy
Yugoslavia

INDIVIDUAL MEDALS

SPORT's forecast for the high-profile individual events in which U.S. athletes are predicted to medal:

BOXING

Welterweight (147)
Juan Hernandez (Cuba)
David Reid (USA)
Andreas Otto (Ger)

Lt. Heavywgt. (178)

Antonio Tarver (USA)
Diosvani Vega (Cuba)
Vasily Shirov (Kazak)

Superheavywgt. (+201)

Alexei Lezin (Rus)
Lawrence Clay-bey (USA)
An Jun Hyun (S. Korea)

WOMEN'S GYMNASTICS

Balance Beam
Mo Huilan (Chn)
Dominique Moceanu (USA)
Lilia Podkopayeva (Ukr)

Floor Exercise

Lavinia Milosovici (Rom)
Shannon Miller (USA)
Gina Gogean (Rom)

MEN'S SWIMMING

50 free
Alexander Popov (Rus)
Gary Hall (USA)
Gustavo Borges (Brazil)



Hakeem Olajuwon

NATHANIEL S. BUTLER/REX PHOTOS

ed, an upset would be possible. Divided and these countries become, at best, favorites for the silver and bronze medals.

"Separated, they'd be able to beat a team of our college players, but not us," says Barkley. "We've got so much talent here."

Is there a chance for an upset? Not in Barkley's book.

"I'll probably end up enjoying these Olympics even more than the first time," says Barkley. "The first time, we were under a lot of pressure. We knew if we had lost it would have been the greatest sports upset in history. This time I'm gonna enjoy it more."

Debate Point D: Dream Team III vs. The Reamed Team

This is the only point worth debating.

The Reamed Team features players who were left off USA Basketball's squad for one reason or another, but in hindsight, this is the one team that may have given Team Trey a tougher game than all but the *Original Dream Team*. (Jordan was the only Reamed Team member who declined a spot on Team Trey; the rest never saw an invitation.)

After all, arguments could be made that Reamed Teamers Jordan, Shawn Kemp and Jason Kidd are the best at their respective positions. Throw Magic Johnson's experience, Gary Payton's defense, Clyde Drexler's glide, Dennis Rodman's rebounding and Chris Webber's potential into the mix and you've got yourself a ball game—the only one worth watching, says this mythological matchmaker. ★

DREAM TEAM III

Statistics from 1995-96 season

C	Hakeem Olajuwon, 33 years old 27 ppg, 11 rpg, 4 apg, 3 bpg
C	David Robinson, 30 years old 25 ppg, 12 rpg, 3 apg, 3 bpg
C	Shaquille O'Neal, 24 years old 27 ppg, 11 rpg, 3 apg, 2 bpg
F	Karl Malone, 33 years old 26 ppg, 10 rpg, 4 apg, 2 spg
F	Scottie Pippen, 30 years old 19 ppg, 6 rpg, 6 apg, 2 spg
F	Charles Barkley, 33 years old 23 ppg, 12 rpg, 4 apg, 2 spg
F	Grant Hill, 23 years old 20 ppg, 10 rpg, 7 apg
F	Glenn Robinson, 23 years old 20 ppg, 6 rpg, 4 apg
G	Penny Hardaway, 24 years old 22 ppg, 4 rpg, 7 apg, 2 spg
G	John Stockton, 34 years old 15 ppg, 3 rpg, 11 apg, 2 spg
G	Mitch Richmond, 31 years old 23 ppg, 3 rpg, 3 apg, 2 spg
G	Reggie Miller, 30 years old 21 ppg, 3 rpg, 3 apg

REAMED TEAM

Statistics from 1995-96 season

C	Patrick Ewing, 33 years old 23 ppg, 11 rpg, 2 apg, 2 bpg
C	Alonzo Mourning, 26 years old 23 ppg, 10 rpg, 2 apg, 3 bpg
F	Shawn Kemp, 26 years old 20 ppg, 11 rpg, 2 apg, 2 bpg
F	Dennis Rodman, 35 years old 6 ppg, 15 rpg, 3 apg
F	Juwan Howard, 23 years old 22 ppg, 8 rpg, 4 apg
F	Chris Webber, 23 years old 24 ppg, 8 rpg, 5 apg, 2 spg
F	Larry Johnson, 27 years old 21 ppg, 8 rpg, 4 apg
G	Michael Jordan, 33 years old 30 ppg, 7 rpg, 4 apg, 2 spg
G	Clyde Drexler, 34 years old 19 ppg, 7 rpg, 6 apg, 2 spg
G	Jason Kidd, 23 years old 17 ppg, 7 rpg, 10 apg, 2 spg
G	Gary Payton, 28 years old 19 ppg, 4 rpg, 8 apg, 3 spg
G	Magic Johnson, 36 years old 15 ppg, 6 rpg, 7 apg

ORIGINAL DREAM TEAM

Statistics from 1991-92 season

C	David Robinson, 26 years old 23 ppg, 12 rpg, 3 apg, 4 bpg, 2 spg
C	Patrick Ewing, 29 years old 24 ppg, 11 rpg, 2 apg, 3 bpg
F	Karl Malone, 29 years old 28 ppg, 11 rpg, 3 apg
F	Charles Barkley, 29 years old 23 ppg, 11 rpg, 4 apg, 2 spg
F	Scottie Pippen, 26 years old 21 ppg, 8 rpg, 7 apg, 2 spg
F	Larry Bird, 35 years old 20 ppg, 10 rpg, 7 apg
F	Chris Mullin, 29 years old 26 ppg, 6 rpg, 4 apg, 2 spg
F	Christian Laettner, 22 years old 18 ppg, 9 rpg, 3 apg*
G	Michael Jordan, 29 years old 30 ppg, 6 rpg, 6 apg, 2 spg
G	Magic Johnson, 32 years old 19 ppg, 7 rpg, 13 apg**
G	Clyde Drexler, 30 years old 25 ppg, 7 rpg, 7 apg, 2 spg
G	John Stockton, 30 years old 16 ppg, 3 rpg, 14 apg, 3 spg

* denotes statistics from 1992-93 season

** denotes statistics from 1990-91 season

DREAM TEAM II

Statistics from 1993-94 season

C	Shaquille O'Neal, 22 years old 29 ppg, 13 rpg, 2 apg, 3 bpg
C	Alonzo Mourning, 24 years old 22 ppg, 10 rpg, 3 bpg
F	Dominique Wilkins, 34 years old 26 ppg, 7 rpg, 2 apg
F	Shawn Kemp, 24 years old 18 ppg, 11 rpg, 3 apg, 2 bpg, 2 spg
F	Derrick Coleman, 27 years old 20 ppg, 11 rpg, 3 apg, 2 bpg
F	Larry Johnson, 25 years old 16 ppg, 9 rpg, 4 apg
G	Reggie Miller, 28 years old 20 ppg, 3 rpg, 3 apg
G	Joe Dumars, 31 years old 20 ppg, 2 rpg, 4 apg
G	Mark Price, 30 years old 17 ppg, 3 rpg, 8 apg
G	Dan Majerle, 28 years old 17 ppg, 4 rpg, 3 apg, 2 spg
G	Kevin Johnson, 28 years old 20 ppg, 3 rpg, 10 apg, 2 spg
G	Steve Smith, 25 years old 17 ppg, 5 rpg, 5 apg

M E D A L P R E D I C T I O N S

100 Free

Alexander Popov (Rus)
Gary Hall (USA)
Jon Olsen (USA)

400 Free

Tom Dolan (USA)
Daniel Kowalski (Aus)
Danyon Loader (New Z.)

100 Backstroke

Jeff Rouse (USA)
Vladimir Selkov (Rus)
Martin Lopez-Zubero (Spa)

200 Backstroke

Vladimir Selkov (Rus)
Tripp Schwenk (USA)
Martin Lopez-Zubero (Spa)

100 Butterfly

Denis Pankratov (Rus)
Scott Miller (Aus)
Mark Henderson (USA)

200 Butterfly

Denis Pankratov (Rus)
Scott Miller (Aus)
Tom Malchow (USA)

200 Ind. Medley

Jani Sievinen (Fin)
Tom Dolan (USA)
Attila Czene (Hun)

400 Ind. Medley

Tom Dolan (USA)
Jani Sievinen (Fin)
Curtis Myden (Can)

400 Medley Relay

Russia
USA
Australia

400 Free Relay

USA
Russia
Australia

In the beginning, which historians have placed at 2,772 years ago, the Olympics had something of an antiquated locker-room ambiance. All the athletes were men, and many competed nude.

For the next two millennia or so, the world was pretty much a boys club, and the Olympics played by the same societal rules. It wasn't until 1900 that women made their debut in the Games in croquet, that most earthy of sports. (Well, the wickets are dug into the dirt.)

Women Olympic swimmers? Not until 1912. Runners? Not until 1928.

it's time to pop out puppies and bake quiche and pot roast for your husband," said Olympic gold-medal swimmer Crissy Ahmann-Leighton way back in 1992, when U.S. swimming officials issued pink name tags for the women and blue for the men at a pre-Olympics training camp.

Truth be told, although U.S. attitudes about women athletes have been slow in changing, the women themselves have learned to cop a 'tude about such misunderstandings and just get on with getting it on.

MIKE POWELL/ALLSPORT

LOOK FOR THE U.S. WOMEN TO MAKE THE BIG STRIDES IN ATLANTA By Philip Hersh **AMERICA'S GOLDEN GIRLS**

Gymnasts? 1952. Rowers? 1976. Cyclists? 1984.

Men indulged in all those disciplines—clothed, by the way—when Baron de Coubertin of France founded the modern Olympics 100 years ago in Athens.

"Olympic competition for women would be impractical, uninteresting, unattractive and incorrect," the Baron would say 20 years later.

Back then, women in the United States still couldn't vote. And it doesn't seem so long ago that women in the upcoming Olympic centennial would have been expected only to bake the 100th birthday cake.

"Everyone says, 'You're married,

That is why the U.S. women in the 1996 Atlanta Games may not only bake the cake, they will take it and eat it too.

The whole exercise should be a consciousness-rising session of Olympian proportions, with swimmer Janet Evans, heptathlete Jackie Joyner-Kersey, sprinter Gwen Torrence, cyclist Rebecca Twigg, soccer player Mia Hamm, gymnast Do-

Jackie Joyner-Kersey, the heptathlon world-record holder, wants to win gold on American soil before she retires.



M E D A L P R E D I C T I O N S

WOMEN'S SWIMMING

50 Free

Le Jingyi (Chn)
Amy Van Dyken (USA)
Natalia Mesheryakova (Rus)

200 Free

Franziska van Almsick (Ger)
Cristina Teuscher (USA)
Chen Yan (Chn)

800 Free

Janet Evans (USA)
Brooke Bennett (USA)
Julia Jung (Ger)

100 Breast

Penelope Heyns (S. Afr.)
Han Zue (Chn)
Amanda Beard (USA)

200 Breast

Amanda Beard (USA)
Brigitte Becue (Bel)
Samantha Riley (Aus)

200 Ind. Medley

Allison Wagner (USA)
Wu Yanyan (Chn)
Lin Li (Chn)

400 Ind. Medley

Krisztina Egerszegi (Hun)
Chen Yan (Chn)
Allison Wagner (USA)

400 Medley Relay

China
USA
Russia

400 Free Relay

China
USA
Germany

minique Moceanu, infielder Dot Richardson and guard Sheryl Swoopes some of the likely session leaders.

Oh, there also will be a guy thing or two to excite the home crowd, what with runner Michael Johnson trying for an unprecedented double win in the 200 and 400 meters, Tom Dolan splashing up a storm, Dream Team III in a looming nightmare for its basketball opponents, and Bruce Baumgartner, at 36, grappling with his own heavyweight legend, which already includes two Olympic golds and a silver in freestyle wrestling. But fans who want to wave the red, white and blue better be sure their chauvinism is of the national variety, for Uncle Sam's nieces may outshine his nephews.

"For 'amateurs,' which means most of us women, the ultimate is being able to go to an Olympic Games and win a gold medal," says Joyner-Kersee, who already has won three. "We're driven to be the best."

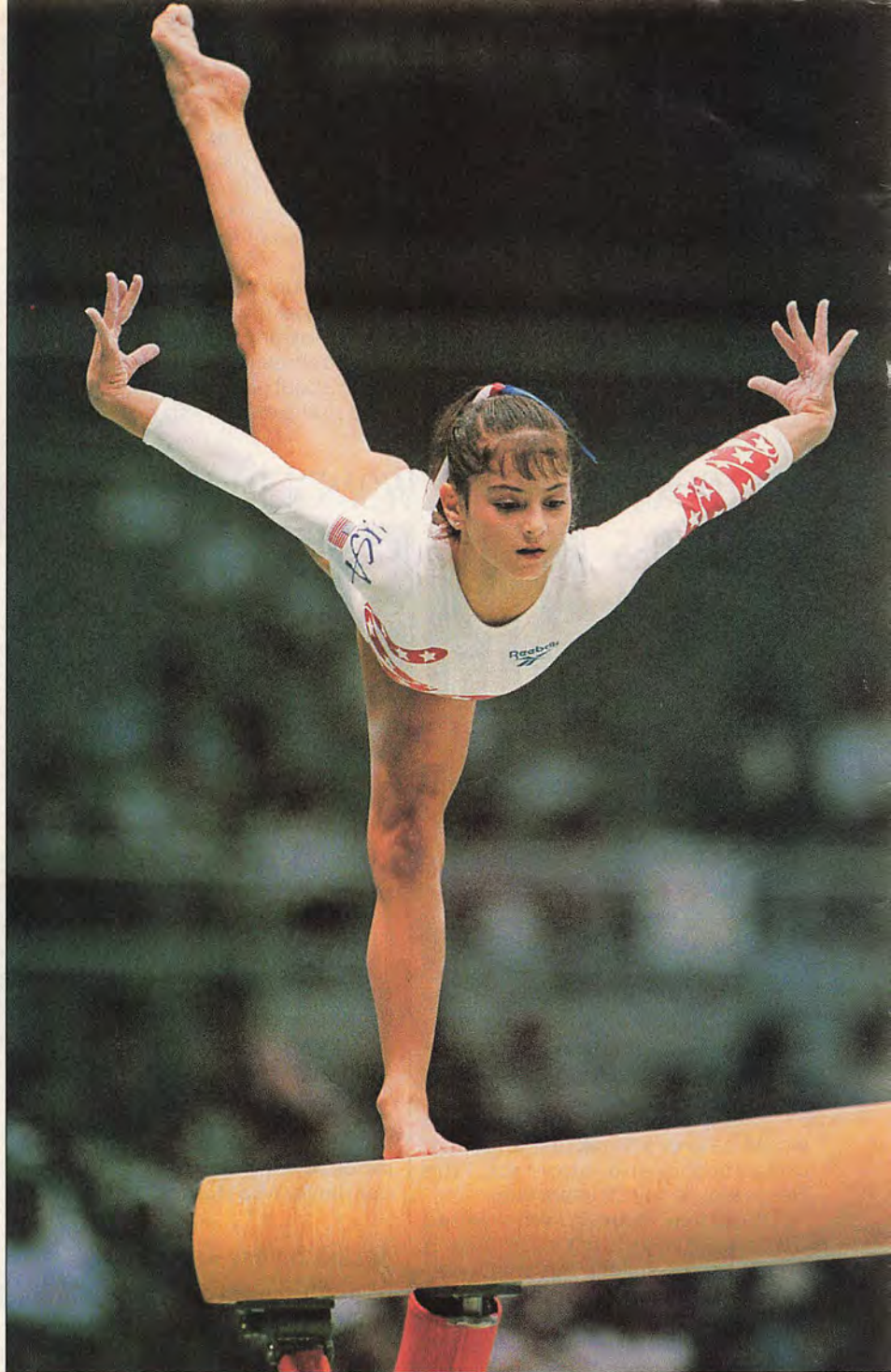
At 34, Joyner-Kersee still drives herself because the Olympics is in the United States. One of the few lines missing from her impressive resumé is having won gold before the home folks; she missed by five points in the seven-event heptathlon at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.

"I never really looked beyond 1988 [when she won gold in the heptathlon and long jump]," Joyner-Kersee says. "If the 1996 Olympics were somewhere else, I don't think I would still be competing."

Joyner-Kersee already is the first person to have won multievents medals in three Olympics, and she's

Another Bela Karolyi protégé, diminutive Dominique Moceanu represents America's best hope for gold in women's gymnastics.

MIKE POWELL/ALLSPORT



M E D A L P R E D I C T I O N S

800 Free Relay

Germany
USA
China

MEN'S TENNIS

Singles

Pete Sampras (USA)
Andre Agassi (USA)
Jim Courier (USA)

WOMEN'S TENNIS

Singles

Monica Seles (USA)
Steffi Graf (Ger)
Chanda Rubin (USA)

MEN'S TRACK & FIELD*

200 Meters

Michael Johnson (USA)
Mike Marsh (USA)
Frankie Fredericks (Nam)

400 Meters

Michael Johnson (USA)
Quincy Watts (USA)
Butch Reynolds (USA)

800 Meters

A. Hatungimana (Burundi)
Benson Koech (Ken)
Brandon Rock (USA)

110 Hurdles

Mark Crear (USA)
Colin Jackson (GBR)
Allen Johnson (USA)

400 Hurdles

Samuel Matete (Zambia)
Derrick Adkins (USA)
Danny Harris (USA)

High Jump

Javier Sotomayor (Cuba)
Troy Kemp (Bah)
Tony Barton (USA)

Long Jump

Ivan Pedroso (Cuba)
Mike Powell (USA)
Carl Lewis (USA)

JOCK ITCH JUST GOT A ONE-TWO KNOCKOUT.

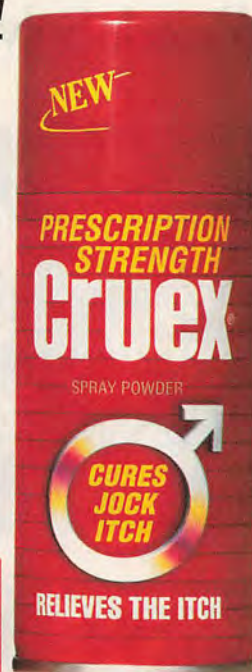
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a favorite for an unprecedented fourth straight multievents gold.

The combination of longevity and excellence also distinguishes Evans' career as a distance freestyler. A tiny teen-ager when she won three Olympic golds in 1988, the 24-year-old Evans now is trying to become the second swimmer to win the same event in three straight Olympics (the other: Australia's Dawn Fraser, in the 100-meter freestyle, from 1956 to '64).

For Evans to do it in the 800 free would be even more remarkable. Her coach, Mark Schubert, finds it

"amazing" that Evans has even made three straight Olympics in the 400 and 800 freestyles. "You have to put in so much training time to be a distance swimmer, it's tough," he says.

Tough also is competing at a world championship 13 days after breaking a collarbone in a training accident, as cyclist Twigg, 33, did last year. After surgery to insert a metal plate and seven screws in her shoulder, she not only won a sixth world title in individual pursuit, but did it in world-record time. That makes Twigg, an Olympics bronze

medalist in 1992, the favorite this time around. "I learned a long time ago not to expect anything," she warns.

Expectations are high for Torrance, a 31-year-old mother from Atlanta, to be the hometown heroine. After years of having her fast footsteps dogged by controversy and mutual name-calling between her and opponents, she would like to be known as the world's fastest woman instead of the sport's feistiest. Should Torrance fulfill her potential, which would give her victories in the 100, 200 and both relays,

M E D A L P R E D I C T I O N S

Triple Jump

Jonathan Edwards (GBR)
Mike Conley (USA)
Brian Wellman (Bermuda)

Shotput

John Godina (USA)
Mika Halvari (Fin)
Brent Noon (USA)

Discus

Lars Riedel (Ger)
Dmitry Shevchenko (Belarus)
Anthony Washington (USA)

Decathlon

Dan O'Brien (USA)
Erki Nool (Estonia)
Edward Hamalainen (Fin)

4 x 100 Relay

USA
Canada
Jamaica

4 x 400 Relay

USA
Jamaica
Kenya

WOMEN'S TRACK & FIELD*

100 Meters

Gwen Torrence (USA)
Gail Devers (USA)
Merlene Ottey (Jam)

200 Meters

Gwen Torrence (USA)
Merlene Ottey (Jam)
Irina Privalova (Rus)

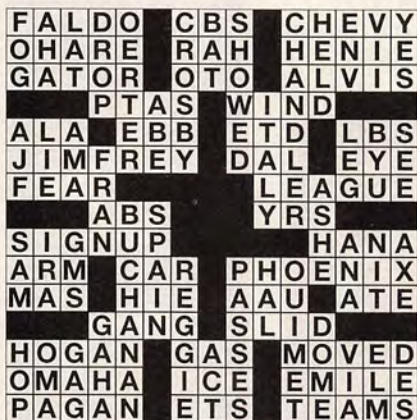
100 Hurdles

Gail Devers (USA)
Olga Shishigina (Kazak)
Yulia Graudyn (Rus)

400 Hurdles

Kim Batten (USA)
Sally Gunnell (GBR)
Tonja Buford-Bailey (USA)

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5BAF7/sp

she also would be known as the first woman to win four track golds in a single Olympics.

Soccer's Hamm and softball's Richardson are the likely standouts in their respective sports' Olympic debuts. Dr. Richardson, 34, who put her surgical residency on hold to compete in Atlanta, is part of a team that won 106 straight games and three straight world titles from 1986 through '95. Hamm's squad is so strong, the U.S. Soccer Federation wanted to pay its players a bonus only for gold.

Moceanu, 15, the latest munchkin gymnastics marvel manufactured by magician Bela Karolyi, will win hearts, if not the judges' minds, against formidable opposition from Romania and China. Swoopes, as in hoops, already has a

shoe named after her. An athletic shoe, of course.

"When I played sports in junior high, they called you a tomboy," Joyner-Kersee says. "Now they call you an athlete."

Athlete, from the Greek word for contest-au-courant, is an understatement for the women who are the gold standard-bearers of the U.S. Olympic team. ★

Philip Hersh covers the Olympics for the *Chicago Tribune*.

Janet Evans, now 24, is favored to win an unprecedented third consecutive gold in the 800-meter freestyle event.



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Long Jump

Heike Drechsler (Ger)
Jackie Joyner-Kersee (USA)
Fiona May (Ita)

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Jamaica
Russia

*Track & Field predictions were made prior to U.S. Trials and other major selection meets.

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Sabine Braun (Ger)

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SCORING

All players will accumulate points based on the following:

OFFENSE

10 yds. rushing	1pt
10 yds. passing	1pt
10 yds. receiving	1pt
TD's	5pts
Converts	1pt
2 pt. Conversion	2pts
Field Goals	3pts

DEFENSE

Full Sack	10pts
1/2 Sack	5pts
Interception	10pts
Int./TD	10pts
Fumbles/TD	10pts

Group 01 Quarterbacks

1 Brett Favre, G.B.	664
2 Steve Young, S.F.	460
3 John Elway, Den.	551
4 Scott Mitchell, Det.	625
5 Jeff Blake, Cin.	565
6 Warren Moon, Min.	594

Group 02 Quarterbacks

1 Jeff George, Atl.	541
2 Erik Kramer, Chi.	536
3 Jim Everett, N.O.	533
4 Drew Bledsoe, N.E.	421
5 Dan Marino, Mia.	491
6 Steve Bono, K.C.	453

Group 03 Quarterbacks

1 Stan Humphries, S.D.	435
2 Dave Brown, NYG.	378
3 Jim Kelly, Buf.	428
4 Troy Aikman, Dal.	420
5 Neil O'Donnell, NYJ.	386
6 Vinny Testaverde, Bal.	389

Group 04 Quarterbacks

1 Jeff Houstetter, Rai.	270
2 Jim Harbaugh, Ind.	373
3 Rick Mirer, Sea.	345
4 Gus Frototte, Was.	346
5 Mark Brunell, Jac.	359
6 Kerry Collins, Car.	363

Group 05 Runningbacks

1 Barry Sanders, Det.	250
2 Marshall Faulk, Ind.	224
3 Emmitt Smith, Dal.	339
4 Chris Warren, Sea.	238
5 Curtis Martin, N.E.	249
6 Ricky Watters, Phi.	230

Group 06 Runningbacks

1 Edgar Bennett, G.B.	205
2 Terry Allen, Was.	208
3 Harvey Williams, Rai.	199
4 Rodney Hampton, NYG.	185
5 Errict Rhett, T.B.	186
6 Derek Loville, S.F.	203

Group 07 Runningbacks

1 Thurman Thomas, Buf.	162
2 Craig Heyward, Atl.	183
3 Bernie Parmelee, Mia.	171
4 Rashaan Salaam, Chi.	162
5 Terrell Davis, Den.	187
6 Natrone Means, Jac.	112

Group 08 Runningbacks

1 Kimble Anders, K.C.	88
2 Eric Pegram, Pit.	131
3 Ernest Byner, Bal.	112
4 Mario Bates, N.O.	141
5 Terry Kirby, Mia.	142
6 Rodney Thomas, Hou.	149

Group 09 Receivers

1 Herman Moore, Det.	238
2 Michael Irvin, Dal.	210
3 Isaac Bruce, Stl.	244
4 Jerry Rice, S.F.	283
5 Robert Brooks, G.B.	216
6 Carl Pickens, Cin.	208

Group 10 Receivers

1 Tim Brown, Rai.	184
2 Brett Perriman, Det.	199
3 Chris Carter, Min.	222
4 Andre Reed, Buf.	49
5 Curtis Conway, Chi.	170
6 Anthony Miller, Den	177

Group 11 Receivers

1 Joey Galloway, Sea.	163
2 Quinn Early, Buf.	148
3 Terance Mathis, Atl.	154
4 Yancey Thigpen, Pit.	155
5 Jeff Graham, NYJ.	150
6 Jake Reed, Min.	161

Group 12 Receivers

1 O.J. McDuffie, Mia.	121
2 Henry Ellard, Was.	130
3 Ben Coates, N.E.	121
4 Rob Moore, Arz.	126
5 Vincent Brisby, N.E.	112
6 Irving Fryar, Phi.	131

Group 13 Receivers

1 Mark Chmura, G.B.	102
2 Johnny Mitchell, NYJ.	74
3 Shannon Sharpe, Den.	95
4 Tony McGee, Cin.	95
5 Jackie Harris, T.B.	80
6 Brent Jones, S.F.	74

Group 14 Kickers

1 Jason Elam, Den.	132
2 Fuad Reveiz, Min.	122
3 Steve Christie, Buf.	126
4 Jason Hanson, Det.	132
5 Morton Andersen, N.O.	122
6 Chris Bonion, Dal.	127

Group 15 Sacks

1 Reggie White, G.B.	120
2 Wayne Martin, N.O.	140
3 William Fuller, Phil.	130
4 Clyde Simmons, Arz.	120
5 Leslie O'Neal, Stl.	125
6 Neil Smith, K.C.	120

Group 16 Sacks

1 Bruce Smith, Buf.	105
2 Kevin Greene, Pit.	100
3 Willie McGinest, N.E.	110
4 Brian Cox, Chi.	105
5 Sean Jones, G.B.	100
6 Jim Flanigan, Chi.	110

Group 17 Sacks

1 Tony Bennett, Ind.	115
2 Pat Swilling, Rai.	130
3 Bryce Paup, Buf.	195
4 Otis Smith, NYJ.	85
5 Derek Thomas, K.C.	80
6 Chris Doleman, S.F.	90

Group 18 Interceptions

1 Larry Brown, Rai.	80
2 Merton Hanks, S.F.	60
3 Aeneas Williams, Arz.	80
4 Otis Smith, NYJ.	70
5 Darri Lewis, Hou.	80
6 Orlando Thomas, Min.	110

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PT



GOLFING TRENDS

NOTES FROM THE TOUR

Belly Dancers, Fashion and Faldo's Most Recent Creations

The \$400,000 Belly Dancer Open—Worth more than \$1.5 billion, King Hassan II of Morocco, once a single-digit handicapper, is doing everything possible to make his 25th-anniversary edition of the Hassan II Golf Trophy more attractive to the world's marquee players. Held in Rabat each fall, this event has featured Corey Pavin, Nick Price and Seve Ballesteros. Yet even with snake charmers and belly dancers as part of the show, many pros have steered clear of this desert shootout. Now the king is fighting the event's old stereotype of "camels and their smelly droppings in the sand" with the most modern of weapons. He's opened up the royal treasury and tried to lure the likes of Greg Norman and Nick Faldo with hefty appearance fees. And just to make sure the competition is a swinging success, the king is sparing no expense when it comes to plush accommodations. Circus acts and state-of-the-art waste removal machines will be provided for the benefit of his palace guests.

A Bad Sign—Peter Jacobsen is always outspoken, only now he's especially critical, insisting, "I feel like a caged animal in the zoo." That's his take on the PGA Tour's new curbs on autograph seekers. Fans must patiently line up in front of a specially designated autograph area and wait for their favorite players to sign. But Jacobsen wants no part of this "stupid approach." Echoing rising player discontent against this experiment, he says: "The players are dead-set against this arrangement. I hate it. The whole scheme is so impersonal, confining, just utterly ridiculous." That's Peter, always one for understating things.

Threads—The real battle for golf supremacy is not on the links but on apparel racks, among a growing number of golfers who have their own clothing lines. Norman has his "attack life" collection, Payne "fashion plate" Stewart recently switched allegiances from NFL Properties to Marshall Field/Dayton-Hudson, and the latest entrant in this GQ sweepstakes,

Brett Ogle, is debuting his "Ethics and Honor" line next fall. More megabuck deals are pending, one featuring a popular long-baller in underwear, a la Michael Jordan. That ought to rattle a few bones at Augusta and other conservative bastions.

Crying the Blues—Despite his Masters win, Faldo is not a happy fella. Along with being embroiled in a messy divorce and the target of nasty British tabloid headlines, he's peeved that Jack Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer remain insurmountable obstacles to his securing course design work. "I can't get a bite in the U.S.," says Faldo. "These guys keep churning them out. Developers just want to be on their fancy bandwagon. I have a good calling card, the course work I've done in England. But I just can't break through." These sore feelings will undoubtedly intensify, for at last count, Palmer and Nicklaus had about 80 design projects, enough work to make Faldo sigh, "They're a [bleeping] factory, and that's awfully frustrating."

—Ed Kiersh

PHOTOGRAPH BY NIKKOR



**HOW TO
IMPROVE YOUR
GOLF GAME
IN 4 EASY
STEPS.**





GOLFING TRENDS

With the golf swing, you must strive for balance and equilibrium between the moving parts of your body and the swinging motion of the club. Watch the players on tour. They all have "controlled swings"—they keep their balance during the backswing and through contact with the ball.

To gain that control, first stand on the practice tee with your feet together, then start swinging slowly. Do this repeatedly for a while, then spread your feet a little farther apart and swing a little faster until you find the correct balance for yourself. When you find yourself swinging comfortably, under control, you have found your optimum speed or, as we say, your "comfort zone."

When swinging the club back, many amateurs have trouble keeping their arms linked or close enough to their bodies, which, when done properly, keeps the club on the proper inside path. They have a tendency to let their arms swing away from their bodies too much, which throws the club too far to the outside. Many pros take the club back on an outside path, but they have the talent (not to mention the time to practice) to reset or reroute the club correctly to the inside

coming down.

Once into the backswing, let the swinging motion simply happen. Don't try to force the issue or become mechanical. The wrists will break naturally on the way back and up. No need to worry where the club is pointing at the top. Just remember you need to build in a slight pause at the top of your swing before starting down, which gets you into the correct rhythm for a good downswing and a forceful and accurate move into the ball.

As for extension, all the guys on the tour have their personal preferences and ways of achieving this all-important fundamental of the swing. When the average player makes a backswing, he doesn't want to allow his left arm to break, fold or collapse, because this reduces, if not eliminates, extension. Keep that left arm straight but not stiff. Keep it extended but relaxed.

Amateurs also have the tendency on



the backswing to pick the club up instead of letting it move back on a nice, low path, but this will lead to a raising of the shoulders, which, again, will throw the club off its proper path.

With the downswing, try to feel like the heel of the clubhead is moving toward the ball first. This will help keep the club on the correct inside path and prevent you from flipping the clubhead out and over the ball with

your wrists as you approach impact.

The next step is just watching that baby go. The spin's been put on the ball at contact. All this talk about a perfect follow-through is sheer nonsense. Look at Chi Chi Rodriguez, Arnold Palmer and others. Their follow-throughs are their own. Just let the club follow the line to the target you have established at address. Then enjoy all those straight shots you will find yourself hitting.

—Fuzzy Zoeller

One of golf's all-time great personalities, Fuzzy Zoeller owns two major titles—the 1979 Masters and the 1984 U.S. Open—and has earned more than \$5 million in 22 years on the PGA Tour.

TIP OF THE MONTH



MIKE KLEIN/GETTY IMAGES

HILL COUNTRY golf club

Golf's version of Billy Crystal squaring off against Jack Palance lies in Texas Hill Country, for in this land of polished cowboy boots and 10-gallon Stetsons, busting par (not broncos) means a wild ride amid winding, deep-carved arroyos, rocky ravines and clusters of mesquite trees.

City slickers might need several margaritas after this rugged test. But if golfers want to match their nerves against 45 sand bunkers and rock-lined gulches, a picturesque gem awaits them in San Antonio at the Hyatt Regency's Hill Country Golf Club, a bedeviling yet inviting resort tract that's far more memorable than the Alamo.

Situated on 170 acres of lush rolling meadows, this Arthur Hills course is like the Old West: big on intimidation.

That danger factor is of course lessened by playing from the front tees, as weekend golfers will find the cactus-lined fairways to be wide and forgiving.

But if a true Texas shootout is your idea of excitement, there are 6,913 yards to tangle with—holes set among steep hills and lagoons that have forced many would-be hombres to wave the white flag.

The par 5's are Big Bertha Country—long, heroic tests styled to evoke frontier crossings with deep, menacing gulches. Here it's tempting to be the gunslinger, just ripping and firing away.

But frontiersmen also relied on their wits. So befitting the trend toward courses offering strategic options to slashers and scratch golfers alike, there are lake- and dry creek-framed holes where strength means little and only shrewdness is rewarded.

(Attractive golf packages range from \$198 to \$378 for two. For further information, call 210/647-1234).

—Ed Kiersh

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GOLFING TRENDS

The "Quiet Assassin" has no regrets, no feelings of wounded pride and bitterness. At least not publicly.

Now he's just trying to keep his low profile, forget the Great Mistake of 1995, and go on with his deadly business. For rather than talk the talk, Lee Janzen shies away from any hint of flamboyance and allows his deft shot-making to terminate PGA Tour rivals.

"I'm not loud like a Deion Sanders or Dennis Rodman, and being shy, even afraid of strangers, has probably cost me," concedes Janzen, 32, the 1993 U.S. Open champ and last year's third-highest money winner with \$1.4 million.

"Sure, I felt bad about not being selected to the U.S. Ryder Cup team, yet why should I point fingers? Now I'm just hoping I'll turn the worst thing that ever happened to me into a positive, that I'll stay focused, consistent and stop slacking off after a win."

The "transformed" Janzen is able to put such brave spins on disappointments. Counseled by sports and motivational therapists the last five years and describing himself as "in a self-affirming changing mode, always dealing



J.D. CUBAN/WALLSPORT



PING'S ISI IRONS

Continuing a
Tradition of
Excellence and
Innovation

When Julius Boros won the 1967 Phoenix Open with the then odd-looking PING "Anser" putter from a brand-new golf club company called Karsten Manufacturing, few knew how this club would both expand and change the world of golf. Indeed, the club's creator, Karsten Solheim, revolutionized the field of golf-club design and manufacturing with his offset perimeter-weighted putter, which, with its weight more or less circling the center, or sweet spot, of the club, actually had as its source of inspiration a ten-

nis racquet. Karsten, a highly successful and inventive engineer—among other claims to fame, he introduced the first rabbit-ear TV antennas—felt that a tennis racquet, with its wooden-frame outer rim and its strings attached to it, would serve as a perfect model for a golf club.

The "Anser," too, had weights on either side of the clubhead, and a slight airy space or slit behind the clubface "represented" the racquet's strings (in addition to making the "PING" sound that would soon go down in golf lore and history). It wasn't long before Solheim extended his line from putters to irons, which incorporated the same design and weighting principles as the now historic "Anser." Karsten's clubs succeeded in two remarkably divergent ways: They made the game easier to play for those new to golf and offered accomplished players precise tools with which to perfect their craft.

Chronicling Solheim's career would take a book, not a segment of a magazine article. Suffice it to say that he has recently passed the reins of his company's command down to his son, John, and the younger Solheim has jumped into the equipment arena

LEE Janzen

The Quiet Assassin

By Ed Kiersh

with the negative emotional stuff," he says, "I'm so shy, I'd feel trapped when surrounded by people when they're not behind the ropes [at tournaments]. While I still feel uncomfortable, I'm learning to communicate. I've realized there are advantages to being more outgoing."

But shy still doesn't sell. Even though Janzen, ranked 16th in the world, won three times in '95, including the prestigious Players Championship, and has the best tour record of any player under 40, he remains the most overlooked star on the pro circuit—the killer nobody knows.

"I never thought I'd reach the Top Three so fast [he's been a tour regular for six years], and I'm confident if I play like a champ in the future, I'll get recognition and endorsements," insists the boyish-looking Janzen. "Maybe people felt, 'Well, he won the U.S. Open, yet he didn't know any better.' But I elevated my game last year, especially my short game, by hitting millions of chips, by working, working, working, and I have to push even harder. Many times my effort and commitment isn't the same week to week."

Janzen is driven now by what he calls "unfinished business."

One of the savviest, most disciplined finishers in the game, yet admittedly lackadaisical after wins, he's striving for a consistency that will propel him to No. 1. Arriving at this pinnacle would undoubtedly bury all the talk about him being a "flash in the pan," which deeply bothers him, and bring him a much-coveted Ryder Cup team selection. But even more important than public recognition, such as Numero Uno status would mean personal fulfillment, an emotional victory after a long internal wrestling match.

"I still have to ask myself, 'Am I ready to have that attitude of a champion?' and am forced to wonder if I can push myself to the limits week after week," admits Janzen, carefully choosing his words while sitting in a locker room before a recent tour event. "Finding that emotional consistency is tough. But I'm working at it, trying to ensure that the next time the Ryder Cup comes around, my day-to-day play will guarantee me a spot."

without missing a stride. His first offering comes in the form of the PING ISI irons. Clearly, intelligence and creativity run in the Solheim family, as this set of clubs delivers the kind of innovations and performance that certainly must make Karsten himself proud.

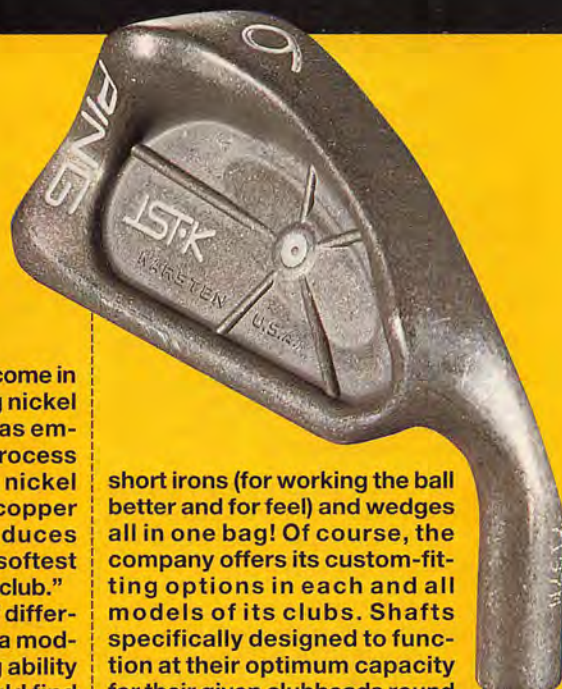
In fact, one could argue that the ISIs represent not one set of great irons, but many. The product actually comes in three versions, or more accurately put, one basic irons design cast in three metals: stainless steel, copper and nickel. Design-wise, the clubs offer a slimmer top line than their Zing 2 predecessors, a redistribution of weight from the club's heel to toe and a fine-tuned bounce angle on the club's soles. However, the more significant differences show themselves best via the clubhead's materials.

The stainless steel ISI K has the largest clubhead and hitting area of the group for maximum forgiveness and to improve accuracy. The ISI Copper has a smaller head and a design geared toward the better player. Copper's density allows the company's designers to create a forgiving hitting surface in a size that many skilled

Whether you choose stainless steel, copper or nickel, the new Ping ISIs are worth every penny.

golfers desire. Finally, the ISIs come in a gorgeous, compact-looking nickel model, which the company has employed in its manufacturing process for the first time. As an alloy, nickel registers tougher than both copper and stainless steel, but produces what the company calls "the softest feel we've ever offered in a golf club."

In addition to the option of differently skilled golfers selecting a model of ISI based on their playing ability (a generalized approach would find the higher handicapper wanting the stainless steel model and the better players choosing between the copper and nickel clubs), the company not only sells but markets and encourages players to create one set out of all three offerings. This "mixing and matching" approach might find ISI K long irons (for forgiveness), ISI Copper middle irons, and ISI Nickel



short irons (for working the ball better and for feel) and wedges all in one bag! Of course, the company offers its custom-fitting options in each and all models of its clubs. Shafts specifically designed to function at their optimum capacity for their given clubheads round out these irons' package of features.

Whatever set or combination a golfer chooses, he or she can count on clubs of the highest quality and ones with a track record for manufacturing consistency and performance excellence unsurpassed in golf.

—Andy Brumer

sport quiz

WIN THE PIN



PIN SHOWN LARGER THAN ACTUAL SIZE

How's your sports IQ? The famous SPORT Quiz has been separating the savvy fan from the weekend wimp for decades. See how you do with these 13 questions. Then check the answers below for your score, and rate yourself as follows: **12-13 correct: Sports genius** **9-11 correct: Good fan** **6-8 correct: Working too hard** **3-5 correct: To the showers** **0-2 correct: Try knitting**

ANSWER THE SPORT STUMPER AND WIN A SPORT PIN. No matter how you do on this month's quiz, we'll send you a SPORT pin pictured above if you send us the correct answer to the SPORT Stumper given below. Send only your name, address and age to SPORT Quiz, 6420 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90048. Limit one per person, and all entries must be postmarked by July 15, 1996.

- 1 This sprinter (pictured) is favored to win an unprecedented double in the Olympic 200 and 400 meters in Atlanta. Name him.
- 2 Which player was not a member of the original Dream Team, which won the gold in the '92 Olympics?
A. Christian Laettner B. Chris Mullin
C. Dominique Wilkins D. Clyde Drexler
- 3 Who was the MVP of the 1995 All-Star game, won 3-2 by the National League?
- 4 True or false: No country other than the U.S. or former Soviet Union has won an Olympic gold medal in basketball.



MIKE HEMITT/ALLSPORT

- 5 Who was the last American League to hit at least 30 homers and steal 30 bases in a season?
- 6 Which heavyweight champion began his career by winning an Olympic gold medal?
A. Mike Tyson B. Evander Holyfield
C. Ken Norton D. George Foreman
- 7 Who was the last non-L.A. Dodger to win the NL Rookie of the Year award?
- 8 Who holds the NBA rookie record for three-pointers?
- 9 Match the following universities with their team nicknames.
A. Central Michigan B. Akron
C. TCU D. Southern Illinois
1. Zips 2. Horned Frogs
3. Salukis 4. Chippewas
- 10 Going into the '96 season, which one of the following pitchers had hurled two career no-hitters?
A. Kent Mercker B. Fernando Valenzuela
C. Randy Johnson D. Darryl Kile
- 11 Who led the NFL in quarterback sacks last season?
A. Pat Swilling B. Neil Smith
C. Reggie White D. Bryce Paup
- 12 Who was the last college football player to win the Heisman Trophy and be a member of a national-championship team in the same season?
- 13 Which active right-handed hitter owns the highest career batting average?
—Steve Gordon

STUMPER Excluding the boycotted 1980 Games, the U.S. has finished in either first or second in overall medals in every Summer Olympics but one. Name it.

JULY '96 STUMPER ANSWER Robin Yount ("Who holds the major-league record for most sacrifice flies?")

THIS MONTH'S QUIZ ANSWERS
1. Michael Johnson 2. C 3. Jeff Conine 4. False (Yugoslavia, 1980) 5. Jose Canseco 6. D 7. Jeff Bagwell 8. Damon Stoudamire 9. A 4. B-1, C-2, D-3 10. A 11. D 12. Charlie Ward 13. Frank Thomas



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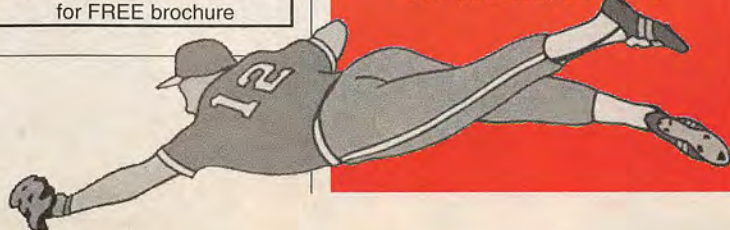
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GLORY S A Y O

**VINTAGE RACING:
LIFE IN THE PAST LANE
BY RICK VOEGELIN**

There is nothing on earth as obsolete as last year's race car. Yesterday's cutting-edge technology quickly becomes a blunt instrument. But park an outdated machine in a dusty barn for a decade or two and it will emerge as the hottest set of wheels in motorsports: a vintage racer.

Race cars that once collected dust are now collecting trophies in vintage racing. Perhaps it was inevitable that baby boomers raised on Speed Racer cartoons and radio broadcasts of the Indy 500 would seek to recapture their lost youth by indulging their automotive fantasies in middle age. Regardless of the psychological implications of the sport, vintage racing is a damn good show—an outdoor automotive museum in which the exhibits snort, roar and rumble.

Several grass-roots organizations have sprung from the automotive landscape to foster the burgeoning interest in vintage racing. The Sportscar Vintage Racing Association (SVRA) boasts 1,800 members and is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. With classes for everything from post-war Ferraris to mid-'70s Mustangs, an SVRA event is a movable feast of racing nostalgia.

"Vintage racing gave me the opportunity to realize dreams," recalls Ford Heacock, the SVRA's founder and first president. "The history of these cars has already been written at Le Mans and Sebring. We're not rewriting history, we're just reliving it."

In fact, the atmosphere at a vintage race is decidedly clubby, a refreshing difference from the cutthroat, win-at-all-costs psychology that pervades professional motorsports. It's not just the cars that are old—so is the etiquette.

"In many ways, vintage racing is a throwback to the early days of auto racing when gentlemen racers loaned each other parts, were courteous to each other on the track, and helped each other out," reports Frank Rupp, the current SVRA president.

The material rewards of vintage racing

are intentionally meager. "There is no prize money, and we award cheap trophies, so there's not much incentive beyond ego gratification to dominate in vintage racing," Rupp observes. "The growth of vintage racing is based on fun and camaraderie. We have parties at every event, and people go to our races to relax and have a good time. Our members don't care for 'serious' racing, where people run into each other. Vintage racing suits their tastes."

Not even vintage racers are immune to progress, however. Historically correct paint schemes and restored bodywork cloak modern safety equipment—a concession to insurance underwriters and the realities of racing in the '90s. And with prices for rare cars topping \$1 million, a strict code of driver conduct is enforced to prevent damage to some very pricey sheet metal.

"Vintage racing isn't an exhibition," Rupp asserts. "The drivers are really racing—but we have strict rules to eliminate cars hitting each other. If there is contact, the driver at fault is put on probation. If there's another incident while the driver is on probation, he is suspended for 13 months. It's strong medicine, and we have to administer it occasionally."

The growth of vintage racing is fueled by an apparently inexhaustible supply of obsolete race cars squirreled away in garages and shops. "We find more cars all the time," says Rupp. "People are always dragging out old race cars they stuck away years ago."

Vintage racing has also given former champions a second chance. The pits are populated with celebrated drivers who made their reputations in racing when tires were skinny and budgets skimpy. "The drivers always say the cars are better prepared today than they were when they raced them," says Rupp.

In vintage racing, as in life, sometimes the past just isn't what it used to be. ★

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